CHAPTER SEVEN

JERUSALEM, ROME, AND ALEXANDRIA

"The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed."


"We must not cast away riches which can benefit our neighbour. Possessions were made to be possessed; goods are called goods because they do good, and they have been provided by God for the good of men: they are at hand and serve as the material, the instruments for a good use in the hand of him who knows how to use them. If you use them with skill you reap the benefit from them."

Clement of Alexandria, Who Is the Rich Man That Shall be Saved?, XIV.

The official legitimation of Christianity within the Roman Empire did not eventuate until the Emperor Constantine issued his Edict of Milan in A.D.313. Very rapidly thereafter, Christians rose to power and prominence in temporal affairs, and leading minds of the Church were obliged to address social issues on a scale which their predecessors had not confronted. The post-Constantinan response is considered in the next chapter. Here, we are concerned with a range of reactions to the economic problem during the centuries in which the emerging Church struggled with the challenges of, minority status; recurring persecution, and its initial attempts to understand what the life of Jesus of Nazareth meant.

THE JERUSALEM COMMUNITY

One of the most celebrated aspects of the economic behaviour of early Christians is related to practices of the primitive Church in Jerusalem during the short span between the execution of Jesus and the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D.70. The Jerusalem community appears to have been involved in an experiment in communalism, and its members engaged in voluntary decapitalisation to a substantial extent. According to the Acts of the Apostles (which might be idealizing the past):

"The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held
in common... None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need.” (Acts 4:32, 34-35; see also, 2:44-45).

Not surprisingly, the progressive decapitalisation soon led to the community’s inability to cope with scarcity by means of its own resources. There is the suggestion in Acts that the onset of destitution may have been reinforced by members of the community forsaking their normal, productive avocations: “They went as a body to the Temple every day.” (Acts 2:46). Such was the plight of the Jerusalem community at an early stage, that when the apostle Paul sought its sanction for his missionary activities, permission was forthcoming only on the condition that he raise funds to help sustain the faltering experiment in train.

Paul recounts the foregoing in his letter to the Galatians. He writes: “So, James, Cephas and John, these leaders, these pillars, shook hands with Barnabas and me as a sign of partnership: we were to go to the pagans and they to the circumcised. The only thing they insisted on was that we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do.” (Ga.2:9-10). As a result of this pledge, Paul was to divert a good deal of his time and energy to raising money for “the saints” in Jerusalem. This irksome diversion, it can be remarked, may help explain the character of the economics of the Pauline epistles. At no stage does Paul advise his congregations to emulate the practice of the mother church. Quite the reverse. The communities for which he feels responsible are not to make their incorporation in Christ an occasion for a plunge into experimentation with economic relationships. Not only are their members to maintain steady and devoted application to work, but also they are not to engage in any dramatic liquidation of capital. Nowhere does Paul even suggest common ownership or pooling of possessions. As Alan Richardson observes, Paul, “who had had to organize relief-collections for the ‘poor saints’ in Jerusalem had already had first-hand acquaintance with the disastrous economic consequences of mistaken eschatological notions...”.

The “disastrous economic consequences” of the Jerusalem experiment, it can be added, were not acknowledged by St. Luke, who wrote Acts. A convert from paganism, Luke was anxious to equate Christian living with voluntary poverty (as is abundantly illustrated in the same writer’s gospel). Hence, as Ernst Haenchen writes, “Luke does not describe in Acts the great collection on which Paul spent so much trouble and exertion and which he mentions in his epistles to the Corinthians and

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