

The Naked Bible Podcast 2.0

[Number 39](#)

“ACTS 2:42-47”

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With

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March 6, 2015

Acts 2:42-47

This passage has been used by scholars and lay folks alike to justify socialism, communism, or some sort of politically utopian society that has the veneer of socialism or communism. This isn't the case at all. Jesus couldn't have been clearer when he said, prior to the events of Acts 2, "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). The kingdom of God is not to be identified with any political or socio-economic system that guides statecraft.

The concerns of God's kingdom are other than those of an earthly state. Consequently, Acts 2:42-47 cannot legitimately be used to tell the state how to conduct its business. Such is not the concern of God's kingdom. The political systems of men are to be evaluated by Biblical theology's opposition to the coercive abuse of power and the sanctity and dignity of human life reflected in biblical teaching and divine law.

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 39, Acts 2:42-47. I am your residential layman, Trey Stricklin and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike. How are you doing?

MSH: I'm doing pretty good. How are you doing?

TS: I'm doing good. So we're going to wrap up Acts 2 today.

MSH: Yup yup, indeed.

TS: Ok well, looking forward to it.

MSH: Alright. So we will, again, get through the rest of the book of Acts today, and I think, as we'll find out in the end, we are planning on an episode of Q&A. So we'll say something about that at the end. But for today, let's just jump into the last several verses of Acts chapter 2. This, believe it or not, this little section is surprisingly controversial, and if it's not immediately familiar to you, I think, by the time I read through it here in the next few minutes, you'll see why it's controversial or might sort of tip something off in your memory as far as what could be done with these five or six verses in Scripture. So beginning in verse 42, we read,

⁴² And they [**MSH: Again, the fledgling church there in Jerusalem**] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

MSH: Now this passage, as you can probably tell if you pay close attention to it, has been used by many people, scholars or otherwise, to defend socialism or communism or some sort of politically utopian society, as though one of those political economic systems is the "biblical" form of government or that has some sort of theological superiority over any other system. And what I'm going to suggest to you is that isn't the case at all. Now, as we jump in for the sake of definition, here's how I would define terms like socialism and communism, again, for the sake of our discussion. Socialism is an economic system and it's one that advocates public ownership of all resources so that the production and distribution of resources or wealth within a society that is under the control of the members of that society either collectively or by some sort of governmental body that "represents" the society. In a socialist system, socialist economy, workers contribute to the society based on their ability, what they can produce, rather than being paid wages and using money to purchase what they want. They don't have to purchase anything they want because everybody has all things in common, so to speak.

Private possessions are limited to personal use items. And, of course, the goal is the distribution of cumulative wealth and, in theory, equality among everyone. Now Communism is sort of upping the ante with Socialism. Communism is Socialism with teeth, as some people have said. It abolishes private ownership and seeks to create a classless society, hence the term Communism. Again, the abolition of private property is a major feature of communism. And, really, in theory and practice, both of these ideas, again, the forbidding private property and having a society without classes, is sort of nonsense because you need leadership, you need people at the top to enforce those rules or those ideas because not everyone is just going to want to do that. And so, you need some sort of coercion and enforcement and that, in and of itself, creates two different classes. So as soon as people who mutually agree, again, in theory, to have a classless society do or say something perceived as violating the idea, then those people have to be dealt with or they, in fact, become, sort of, the default superior ruling class. So Socialism and Communism, there's a lot of overlap there.

One is sort of more militant or coercive than the other. Now the question is, for our purposes, does Acts 2:42-47 teach either of these systems. So, again, the reading part of the passage again, verse 44, 'all who believed were together and had all things in common and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need.' Then, day by day, they were doing things like gathering together in the temple and attending the temple, breaking bread in the house, and so on and so forth. Now on the surface, it sounds like what's described here could fit with socialism or communism but that conclusion misses a number pretty obvious things. So, first, if you notice in the passage, there is no state authority, in the passage. It's talking about the apostles and, of course, that would be the 12, really, the greater number 120 we saw from Acts chapter 1, and probably some converts from the day of Pentecost. I say probably because most people actually mentioned at Pentecost were from other countries.

That was the whole idea. The whole point was that once they have embraced the gospel, they return to the nations and begin the process of reclaiming the nations that were disinherited in the Babel event. So in this passage, there's no state authority. It's not setting up a state system of government, government for the whole society. It's very particular. Second, what we read is described as voluntary. Since there's no state authority, that makes sense. In fact, we don't even read that the apostles taught anyone they should do this; sell their goods, all that sort of thing. They don't actually teach them to do this, like, now that you're Christians, you're supposed to do this, or this is the right thing to do, or we're setting up the kingdom of God. This is it. We're going to sell our private property. There's none of that going on in the passage. In fact, since it's entirely voluntary, it's from the heart and that alone, the absence of coercion and a mandate by sort of overlords, distinguishes what's going on in Acts 2:42-47 from socialism and communism, and really, any other sort of political state.

The people were selling possessions and distributing the wealth to the poor voluntarily. We're also going to see this again in Acts chapter 4 and 5. And, of course, Peter, in those contexts, says very plainly that it wasn't required. Acts 4 and 5, there's no condemnation of private property, either. It's just that this is what some people were doing. They didn't have to do it. They did it voluntarily. They thought it was the right thing to do to help people out. And so they did it. And it gets recorded and mentioned in the book of Acts in several places. Now that's the immediate context. If we move to a wider context and make some observations, we see, as well, where this use, I would say, this abuse of Acts chapter 2 sort of becomes apparent. Couple

of other thoughts, the activity described in Acts of having all things in common, that phrase is actually only mentioned in Acts 2 and 4 in the New Testament. The phrase never occurs of any other New Testament church founded by Paul or any other apostle. Now that suggests that there was something unique about the situation in the original Jerusalem Church that presumably wasn't transmitted or handed down by the apostles as some sort of binding custom or inspired idea to other New Testament churches.

That omission would be really strange if what we're reading in Acts chapter 2 was binding revelation or a binding example. This is what the kingdom of God is. If that was true, the omission here is strange since it's not passed down to all the other churches that we read about the New Testament, much less, some sort of political state. Second, according the rest of the New Testament, the shared wealth of the Jerusalem church did not elevate its economic condition. Now this is one of the myths that Socialism and Communism spread, this whole idea of everybody having all things in common each according to his own need. The leveling or the commonality is always in the downward direction. It's never the people who are poor being elevated to having wealth like the people at the top. It's always the people at the top sort of essentially have their wealth taken from them and distributed so that everyone is at some sort of level of underclass compared to the wealth that had existed, again, prior to the to the advent of this sort of system.

So, that alone should make us suspect of what's going on. But if you actually look at the Jerusalem church, it's sort of illustrative of this myth. Again, if this was this utopian society, well you'd think the Jerusalem church would've been so much better off than other churches. It would have been sort of a model. But the exact opposite is what you read in the New Testament. The church in Jerusalem is described in New Testament every time you get into these sorts of details as notoriously poor. And its poverty was the reason that Paul took up collecting money on his missionary trips from the startup Gentile churches. The joy in the Jerusalem church wasn't the fact that they were all the same at a very low economic level, like this is a great thing. What made it noteworthy in Acts 2 was they had each other and they were all in Christ and they were mutually supportive.

They didn't have much, but what they did have they took care of each other. Again, it was not sort of to create a model economic system that's utopian in nature that everybody should just thirst after. That is clearly not what we see in the New Testament. The goal was unity and community. It wasn't to make some sort of economic or political statement. If it made any statement at all, it would be this doesn't work as far as, again, having more than a subsistence lifestyle. If we move from there to an even wider context, we come to what I think is the most significant context of all, and one that disconnects the church from any, and I mean any, including the American system that many of us really enjoy and love, the church is disconnected from all political systems. And that's because of what the things Jesus said. Jesus could not have been much clearer when he said, prior to the events of Acts chapter 2, this is way back in the Gospels, Jesus says, my kingdom is not of this world. That's John 18:36. The kingdom of God is not to be identified with any political or socioeconomic system that guides state craft. The concerns of God's kingdom are other than those of an earthly state. So consequently, Acts 2:42-47 cannot legitimately be used to tell the state how to conduct its business. That isn't the concern of the kingdom of God.

The political systems of men are to be evaluated by biblical theology's opposition to things like coercive power, and the sanctity and dignity of human life. Again, that's biblical

theology and, of course, divine law. But nowhere does Scripture teach that the church is the state or, more obviously, that the state is the church. Again, Jesus himself, in another place, called for the separation of the church and the state. He spoke of the kingdom of heaven as distinct from the state, the whole render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Again, back to John 18:36, 'my kingdom is not of this world'. And so to marry any political system, even if it's one we like, to the church is to transgress biblical theology, very clear biblical theology I might add as well. We don't marry a kingdom of God to any kingdom of man. I just don't know what Jesus could have said to be any clearer on this point. Now, finally, the Bible, especially the Old Testament, makes some other things clear that are at odds with specific aspects of Socialism and Communism. We're targeting those because that's typically how Acts 2:42-47 is cast. And I want to list out some of those, again, some of these other things that are pretty clear in Scripture.

Number one, the Bible doesn't forbid or condemn private property. It quite transparently does the reverse. Laws against thievery are what they are and only make sense as they are if private property is something that is good, that is valued, that is legitimate. The Bible doesn't forbid or condemn private property. Second, the Bible doesn't forbid or condemn private possessions that are used to create wealth, entrepreneurship, having a business, that sort of thing. Profit is actually neither forbidden nor condemned. Now what is condemned are things like extortion, using your economic power to, again, coerce someone to do something for you against their status. That sort of thing is universally condemned in Scripture. Using your wealth, again, to create injustice before the law, absolutely condemned in Scripture. But the idea of, again, owning private property and having a business and generating wealth and employing people, these things are not condemned in Scripture. Third, the Bible contains no laws that call for a classless society. In fact, Old Testament law presumes social classes and it's sort of part and parcel of human behavior and, frankly, human ability. We were all created in God's image but we're not all created equal in terms of our attributes or our abilities, our interests, our ambitions, our drives, and those sorts of things.

Those things get manifested in different ways because we're all different. We share a status and an identity being a divine imager, going back to Genesis 1:26 and so on, and that's the way God made us. We reflect him. We share that attribute and other attributes with him, but that doesn't mean we're all clones. We all have the same interests and abilities. The same thing can be said for the teachings of Jesus. Not only does the Old Testament law presume social classes, but when Jesus talked about social classes, and he brings them up a lot, he never calls for their abolition. What he calls for is righteousness among the members of social classes within their class and to all the other classes. He called for righteous relationships. The words of the apostles and epistles are consistent with that. Paul and others benefit from the benevolence of the wealthy, certain wealthy individuals like in Luke 23:50 and Acts 17:12 that supported Paul and his ministry. Paul benefits from business owners in Acts 16:14. He never links their conversion or walk with God to the surrender of their business or the surrender of their possessions.

The very idea of giving to the poor according to one's ability requires differing financial statuses. These are the kinds of things you read throughout the New Testament. There is no sort of utopian call or theological call for a classless society. The kingdom of God is not concerned with those sorts of things. It's concerned, though, with righteousness in whatever social class, whatever society that there happens to be on earth. Again, principles like righteousness and

telling people the truth, telling people the truth of the gospel, all these overarching concerns of the kingdom of God are applicable to any human society no matter what it is. And, you know, we can look at that and say, well, you know, if that were the case, then certain human societies, again, like communism, will say because of the coercive element there and the prohibition of anyone getting well past a subsistence lifestyle. If that were the case, those systems would have to change. Well maybe that's the case. Again, you can make the same argument you with sort of extorting or crony capitalism, too. And, again, crony capitalism's not what I would call sort of normal capitalism.

I think we know what crony capitalism is, again, using economic status to wield political power and to get political preference. Again, that's the sort of thing that Scripture would look down upon from the get-go, because it not only is inequity, it creates inequity and it creates a system where people become victimized. And those, again, are the sorts of ideas that the kingdom of God is concerned with because they transcend sort of the normal day-to-day monetary exchange sort of thing that we would be talking about with economic systems. So I think it's pretty obvious that using Acts 2:42-47 to prop up the political system is a dramatic over-reading of the passage. Instead of political theory, we ought to be looking at Acts 2 for what it does tell us to do. And I have some thoughts there, too. I'll list 4 of them. First, believers ought to take care of believers. That isn't a denial that charity extends beyond the believing community, only that Acts 2 shows us where having all things in common starts, and that's within the church. If I could put it this way, wouldn't it be nice if church was not a time and place? Wouldn't it be nice if church meant the believing community no matter where you are and where it is? If we thought really more on the non-local level when it comes to this, I think there would be some significant points of application that would really make the church socially and culturally distinct from what it is now.

But in our culture, unfortunately, church has become a time and a place and that's pretty much it, and it pretty much becomes insular. It's not something that reaches out, and even within the community. Again, if you're thinking church is a time and a place, you tend to lose sight of why you're really there and one of the reasons why you're really there is to take care of fellow believers. The second, I would say it's poor theology to presume that the state should be taking care of people in our churches. We might like to hear Socialism and Communism aren't biblical, but neither is letting the government do what the church is supposed to be doing. Now granted, we live in different times with complicated circumstances, like the dissolution of the family and there's significant geographical separation of family members, so you can't always presume that the extended families can be there to meet the needs of its members. We all understand that. But in my experience, Christians often feel suspicious or reluctant. They feel those kinds of things, suspicion or reluctance, more than sort of this bond of love, or this bond of affinity, this bond of community, when it comes to believers in need, even within the walls of a particular church.

Again, that just shouldn't be. I don't see how you can think that way and read Acts 2:42-47 and sort of be honest with yourself. The third, the picture in Acts is also one where believers were aware of the needs of others and there was no shame in this situation. Again, I'll grant that the situation was different and the fledgling faith going up against immediate persecution, that has a way of bonding people, again, circumstance of persecution. But I would suggest that shouldn't it be easier to help out when you're not being persecuted? Again it's just something to think about. And lastly, I can't help seeing something of an Edenic model behind Acts 2:42-47. I

don't know that there was any deliberate intent there, but I look at that passage and I just can't help thinking of what an Edenic circumstance might have developed into. What I mean by this is that the church ought to be a bit like Eden, where believers are family, for real, they really are family, and no one is in want for genuine needs. And I'm not talking luxuries and things like that, but things that in our culture we really need to make ends meet. And we all know what Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians, if you don't work you shouldn't eat, and all that sort of thing, and that's certainly biblical theology.

But there are circumstances in life, and we're all well aware of this, where sometimes someone can't work or can't find work or they may run into some other circumstance that sort of throws a monkey wrench into that model that Paul very clearly articulated to the Thessalonians. When you get into these situations, believers are family and no one should be in want of a genuine need. What's really needed should be taken care of, again, within the community. And I'll admit this is a bit, I don't know if personal is the right word, but I can remember in my own life just wondering, seeing people, this was as a teenager. I was a new believer and just knowing that there are people in the church and outside who were coming to the church that just really had significant needs. Maybe they didn't mention it, and so that's part of the problem, but even if it was really transparent that this person really needs help with groceries this week or this month or for an extended period or rent or something like that or has a bill that if this was just removed then that would just create a certain real window of financial freedom for this person. I remember just thinking why in the world are we spending so much money on things like flowers that sit in front of the pulpit.

That was sort of how my admittedly somewhat adolescent juvenile mind was thinking, like why do we care about these sorts of things when there are these legitimate needs right in front of our face. I actually asked one time. I asked the pastor of the church about that and his answer was, well, if we don't have nice things like this, if the building isn't attractive, certain people won't want to come. Again, my I guess naïve response to that was, let them stay away. Who cares if they come? I mean if this is all the deeper their faith then let them go somewhere else. Again, that obviously didn't go anywhere at the time but I meant it then and I still mean it now. I'm quite unrepentant for thinking those sorts of thoughts, because if that's really why you're there, if that's what you need to keep you coming back, you've got significant spiritual problems and, you know, you ought to be thinking about that rather than, hey, the flowers look nice this week. And again, the person sitting next in the pew is in some serious need of some resource. And I think it goes beyond money resources, too. We have lots of people interested in church to train people to do a job or give people a suit to go for job interviews. There's just any number of things we could do to have more of all things in common. But, really, in some small way, mimic legitimately what we see going on in Acts 2:42-47. It's not there to erect a state or to make a church state or state church or endorse any political system. It's there to be a model for how believers should be thinking about their own community.

TS: The greatest example for me, personally, as far as community was the Native Americans. I really, minus the violence, if you take that element out, I really liked the lifestyle. They were a family. They stayed together. They each had a different position, job, responsibility, and they knew everybody. And I really liked that particular sense of community throughout history.

MSH: You know what I think of, and I don't know much about Mormons, okay, so this could be a complete caricature, an incorrect caricature, but the whole notion of storing up food and other resources so that if there is some sort of tragedy or some sort of rough circumstance for a while. They are ready to take care of their own, just no questions asked. You can flip the switch tomorrow and they are fully capable of meeting the needs of the people within their congregation, and probably even beyond that on a local level. And it's like, boy, that's just really good forward thinking. If we never have a rough time, maybe a natural disaster, or some other sort of event, then they can still use that in a food shelter or something like that, or on a week to week basis if there's a family that they need something.

That's just good thinking in my view so I wish, again, we would see resources devoted like that, again, kind of forward thinking, but also thinking of practical ways to help your people that want to, and they are, they have a testimony being in the family of God. People who come to our churches and do that, and even people outside the building. Would it really be a bad thing if you become known as the church that helps people? How does that hurt? Again, I realize it can be abused and you have to have some wisdom there. In our church, we have these kinds of conversations a lot, so I know there are things to be wise about here. But most of the momentum seems to swing back the other way, and churches don't have anything like that. And I just think it's really unwise.

TS: I think nothing short of a catastrophe globally will it bring everything, society, back to local community. Now we live in a society where we don't even know our neighbors. I find that sad. And I really like your first point, the concept of church being everywhere, wherever you walk. It was not just the physical building at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning and Wednesday nights or whatever. It's every day, every time, every person.

MSH: Yeah. It's like when you hear the word church, we're just trained culturally, and I think in our churches, ecclesiastical if I can use that term, we're trained when we hear the word church to think of that place at that time or some other specific time where an activity or a program is running. What if when we heard the word church we could see like 50 or 100 faces of people that we knew were believers? I just think that would be life changing and church changing, if we thought of it differently.

TS: I agree. That's what I tell people when its 12 o'clock and Dallas Cowboys are playing.

MSH: Well we have the Seahawk problem where I live so I get that.

TS: You have any other last thoughts?

MSH: No. No. I think that's what I wanted to sort of spout off on today.

TS: Well next week we'll have our first Q&A episode, so please send in any questions to me or Mike. In the subject line, if you wouldn't mind, put the episode that your question is relating to. Mike, do you have any other...

MSH: Well today I'm actually taken off in a couple hours for Portland. We have a regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on Saturday. So I'm going up there. My son is going along, but I'm going to meet somebody there who follows the podcast and the blog, the Naked Bible blog. So I like when those sorts of things are possible. I'll post something about, I'm going here or there and I'll get e-mails and say, you know, if I come over, can we chat? You know, get you a cup of coffee even though I don't drink coffee, sure. I actually like to meet people who follow what I do, because if it's they're that invested, they usually either have a good idea about something that they like to see or they'll say something about, hey, I really appreciate this, and then I'll get to ask questions, well, what about that. It's a good way to get feedback in sort of a direct way about what I'm doing. And people usually want to pick my brain about something, but I like to pick back a little bit. And I may not always tell them that that's what I'm doing but it's a good way to get some direct feedback on what's helpful and maybe doing something different to make something more helpful or something that's altogether new and having a good idea to think about, and sort of put in the hopper and maybe that will become reality. Maybe it won't, but it just helps me to think about stuff I should be doing.

TS: Speaking of helpful, our transcripts, I just want to remind everybody that our transcripts usually go on our website four to five days after the show airs. So a lot of people have been asking me where can I get the transcripts. Well you're going to find those transcripts; the link is actually on the episodes page. So if you click, I think we've got 35,36,37,38 episode transcripts up. So if you click the link to go into that episode, you'll see the description of the episode is about and right below that, you're going to see the link for the transcripts. And they're in PDF format. And I just want to make sure everybody knows where they can go get those transcripts, and to be patient. Usually, we'll get on the website about 4 to 5 days in that timeframe so we'll get them up there is soon as we get them.