

The Jerusalem church's measure of love

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This week's short passage from Acts gives a snapshot of the Christian community in Jerusalem, including a list of essential practices. A few questions:

- ◦ Most of these basic practices are familiar to most Christian churches today, but a congregation tends to have particular practices that anchor its ministry. What are the key practices for your community?

- ◦ I'm struck by how glossy and upbeat this passage sounds, like something from an infomercial or a brochure: "Awe came upon everyone...all were together...having the goodwill of all the people." It's possible that the community was in fact well-received by many, but it's clear that the goodwill did not endure—just a few chapters later, some of the apostles are jailed and Stephen is stoned to death. Sometimes the image a congregation has of itself does not match what neighbors or visitors might say. What impression does your congregation make in your community? Does it match the congregation members' self-image and expectations?

- ◦ Verses 44–45 present a demanding economic commitment. Scholars often help mitigate our potential discomfort with this by pointing out that if the early Jerusalem church really did practice this kind of radical sharing, it did not continue for long, and it was not a widespread practice in the early church. But in his commentary on Acts, John Wesley writes this:

To say the Christians did this only till the destruction of Jerusalem, is not true; for many did it long after. Not that there was any positive command for so doing: it needed not; for love constrained them. It was a natural fruit of that love wherewith each member of the community loved every other as his own soul. And if the whole Christian Church had continued in this spirit, this usage must have continued through all ages. To affirm therefore that Christ did not design it should continue, is neither more nor less than to affirm, that Christ did not design this measure of love should continue. I see no proof of this.

Throughout the history of the church there have been Christians who practice economic sharing in some fashion that resembles what is described in these verses. There still are today. For the rest of us, it bears considering—what shape might this "measure of love" take in our lives?