

Review of "Sharing Possessions" by L. T. Johnson

L. T. Johnson, Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands, 2nd edn. Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011. Pp. viii, 170. Pb. £12.99.
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"Provocative", "breath of fresh air", "[his] polemic against the community of goods is a bit overdone": some of the review comments on the original edition of *Sharing Possessions*, published in 1981. This second edition reflects thirty further years of thinking by Johnson on the question of "the connection between being a Christian and the way we own and use things" (p.1). The author has not edited the original text, but added comments and study questions on each chapter, and a substantial epilogue which scans intervening work by others, responds to criticism of the first edition, and reflects on four themes arising out of his earlier arguments.

Johnson approaches his question with a discussion of the ambiguity of our language about possessions. An initial interrogation of Luke-Acts as a code for living throws up complexity and contradiction, and highlights the limitations of using Scripture in this way. So he turns to theological reflection, starting with the mystery of embodied human existence. We can say "I am" a body, and "I have" a body, so possessing is a fundamental aspect of existence. It is our attitude to possessions (mental, relational and spiritual as well as material) that is important, and the real sin is to confuse the being and the having. With these new insights, Johnson returns to Scripture to consider idolatry and faith. Idolatry is seeking to establish the self in my possessions. Faith is recognising that being and worth come from God alone, and if we stand before God in this poverty of faith, we need not cling to any of our possessions but can use and share them in perfect freedom. But there is no blueprint; we must 'simply' be available and attentive to God's will and the needs of our fellow humans, as exemplified by Jesus.

In the last chapter of the original text, Johnson provocatively critiques the ideal of a community of possessions, with reference to Greek utopian thinking, and makes some remarks on almsgiving, drawing on Jewish rabbinic sources. This chapter prompted the most critical reviews, and leads Johnson in the added epilogue to address capitalism in more detail, briefly the emergence of liberation theology and its different emphasis on transformation of societal structures, and the theme of hospitality as a means of sharing by a community of possessions.

Some of the original reviewers bemoaned Johnson's failure to give concrete guidance for the faithful use of possessions, but it would be strange if he had, given his approach to Scripture. Instead, a further theme on discernment develops his thoughts on attentiveness to need. In the two themes of stewardship and sabbath, he missed an opportunity to

discuss the environment and sharing of the earth's resources; we are de facto a planet-wide community of possessions with inter-species and inter-generation dimensions. But he has provided several ways in to the issue, and, in his approach to theological reflection and the use of Scripture, the tools for engagement. It is his engaging and readable application of these tools to a knotty and important question that make *Sharing Possessions* worth reissuing after so many years.