

Christian Freeloaders

The generosity of early Christian communities was sometimes put to the test by persons who sought support beyond what was necessary or reasonable.

Some churches practiced a communal lifestyle: members pooled their money and possessions and lived out of a common purse (cf. Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35). But the book of Acts also reveals that there were unscrupulous people who tried to take advantage of this arrangement (5:1–11).

Problems also arose with traveling missionaries. In keeping with the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew's Gospel, transient preachers were to receive support from the communities that they visited (10:7–15). But a Christian document from around 100 (*Didache* 11:3–6), just fifteen years after the Gospel of Matthew was written, suggests limits for such support:

Act toward the apostles and prophets as the gospel decrees. Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as the Lord. But he should not remain more than a day. If he must, he may stay one more. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. When an apostle leaves, he should take nothing except bread, until he arrives at his night's lodging. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet.*

The situation addressed in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13 may reflect similar tensions in the early church involving the appropriate role of charity. We know from Paul's letters that the Thessalonian Christians (and other believers in Macedonia) were particularly noted for their generosity; indeed, they were known for giving "beyond their means" and for being generous in ways that they could scarcely afford (2 Cor. 8:2–4). It is not hard to imagine that there were people willing to take advantage of the community's well-intentioned but naive altruism.

*Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1:435.