

ECONOMIC SYSTEMS IN THE BIBLE¹

In the Old Testament we find a free enterprise (i.e. private ownership/Capitalism) type of economic system. Note that people own land and live under "*their own vine and fig tree*" (e.g. I Kings 4:25; II Kings 18:31; Prov. 27:18). There are laws regarding private property, e.g. two of the Ten Commandments: "*Thou shalt not steal*" & "*Thou shalt not covet*" (Ex. 20:15, 17), laws regarding the boundaries of private property (e.g. Dt. 19:14; 27:17; Prov. 22:28; 23:10), etc.

In the New Testament we still see private ownership (Acts 5) and free enterprise economic activity (e.g. Acts 18:3; II Thess. 3:6-12). However in the book of Acts, during the beginning of the early church, there are a couple of passages that state that some of the believers were sharing their belongings (Acts 2:44; 4:32). Advocates of Socialism or Communism claim that these passages provide biblical support for their position. However it is not possible to call what is described in Acts "*Communism*" or "*Socialism*," because the communal sharing of goods was: **a) Completely voluntary & b) Involved only Christians!** In addition, what occurred then was **temporary**. Ryrie observes, "*Fellowship in material things was enjoyed by these early Christians (2:44, 46). No doubt many of the pilgrims to the feast of Pentecost lingered in Jerusalem to learn more of their new-found faith in Christ, and this created pressing financial needs. After the incident recorded in chapter 5 there is no further mention of the use of this plan of sharing in common, for its necessity was undoubtedly short-lived.*"²

By way of contrast, the various versions of Communism/Socialism have **never** been voluntary! The "*People's*" (sic) Republic of China, the former Soviet Union, and virtually all other socialist/communist regimes have confiscated—usually physically and brutally—the land, goods, etc., of its people, and forced submission to such action with an iron fist. Cuba under Fidel Castro is a typical example. Such behavior is light years away from what happened in Acts 4.

Furthermore, modern Communism/Socialism **isn't promoted by groups of Christians, but rather by nations**—the vast majority of whom make absolutely no claim or pretense of being followers of Christ—in fact they are often blatantly atheistic! A cursory reading of Karl Marx's "*Communist Manifesto*" and other such literature will confirm that **modern socialistic communism is vehemently and diametrically opposed to biblical Christianity**—or even to religion in general! Consider for example China's current and ongoing opposition to & persecution of Christians.

A closer examination of the Acts 4 passage provides still more evidence that what occurred there was **not** communism/socialism—Christian or otherwise. Note that "[a] *The sale of property was quite voluntary* [4:34]. [b] *The right of possession was not abolished.* [c] *The community did not control the money until it had voluntarily been given to the apostles.* [d] *The distribution was not made equally but according to need. These are not communistic principles. This is Christian charity in its finest display.*" (Ryrie, p. 36)

Finally, it should also be pointed out that the voluntary sharing of goods (*communalism*) in the book of Acts **didn't work** even then—i.e. when practiced by Christians! In the very next chapter (Acts 5:1-11) we already see people who had been involved in the sharing of goods lying—due to pride and a sinful desire to be noticed—and falling down dead because of it! (*Ananias & Sapphira*) Modern experiments at communalism and the mutual sharing of food, goods, etc. by professing Christians, such as was attempted in Ceresco, Michigan a century ago, have likewise ended in failure. Perhaps the most famous example is the Pilgrims' experiment tried at Plymouth, Massachusetts: "...with the help of the indigenous 'Indians' in the region, by Autumn of 1621 the Pilgrims had enough produce to hold a three day feast and time of thanksgiving. ... Endeavoring to improve the production at Plymouth Plantation, in 1622 (Governor William) Bradford implemented a collectivist policy, which almost destroyed the rest of the Plymouth settlement. Bradford wrote that to increase production, he allotted each family a plot of land, and mandated that '*all profits & benefits that are got by trade, working, fishing, or any other means must be forfeited to a common storehouse in order that all such persons as are of this colony, are to have their meat, drink, apparel, and all provisions out of the common stock.*' In theory, this would be good for the Colony because each family would receive equal share of produce without regard to their contribution. **Unfortunately, then as now, collectivism only works in theory.**

Bradford wrote that his plan undermined the incentive to produce, noting that it '*was found to breed much confusion and discontent, and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort.*' After the abysmal results in 1622, Bradford wrote that the Colony leaders contemplated, '*how they might raise as much corn as they could, and obtain a better crop.*' They decided to trade their collectivist plan for a free market approach, and in 1623, Bradford wrote, '*This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any other means the Governor or any other could use... Instead of famine now God gave them plenty and the face of things was changed, to the rejoicing of the hearts of many... Any general want or famine hath not been amongst them since to this day.*' Property ownership and families freely laboring on their own behalf replaced the 'common store,' but only after their ill-advised experiment with communism nearly wiped out the entire settlement. The Colony celebrated a much greater Day of Thanksgiving in 1623. After the Pilgrims were given liberty and incentive to be industrious, the Colony thrived, and by 1624, production was so abundant that the Colony exported corn back to England."³

In the Millennium it appears that private ownership (Capitalism, free enterprise) will again be the norm, since passages referring to the millennium mention people dwelling under "*their own vine and fig tree*" e.g. Micah 4:4; Zech. 3:10.

In reality we own nothing at all, God owns everything! We are simply "*stewards*" (overseers, foremen), watching over and caring for the owner's (God's) property—from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means "*house law*" or "*house rule*." The Bible speaks of stewards and stewardship approximately 20 times. A companion study gives some references on stewards. The key quality of a good steward was *faithfulness*, i.e. maturity leading to careful administration. As Christians we should have the attitude that we own nothing, but that everything belongs to God. Money, goods, physical resources, etc., are simply entrusted to us by God for us to take care of and use wisely for His glory, for the benefit of others, and for the furtherance of His kingdom. "*Every good gift comes from Him*" (James 1:17).

¹ By Mike Edwards. Originally written December, 1994 (revised 6/96, 2/06 11/09 & 3/13)

² Charles C. Ryrie, "*The Acts of the Apostles*" (Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1961), p. 25

³ www.patriotpost.us/perspective (see Perspective Archive, "*Account of the First Harvest and Thanksgiving*," Wed., Nov. 25, 2009)