

The Myth of Christianity's 'Socialist Roots'

Take a closer look at those passages in Acts. The “communal” arrangement was voluntary.

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Nearly two millennia ago, some of the earliest followers of Christ in Jerusalem arranged their affairs in a way that still prompts the claim that Christianity’s roots are socialist, communal, or even “communist.” When we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we should understand that this claim is spurious, if not blasphemous.

Its sources are two passages in the New Testament’s Book of Acts, [chapter 2, verses 44–45](#), which states: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to



anyone who had need.” [Acts 4:32](#) declares: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.”

Many on the left argue that Christian teaching should spurn private property and endorse a socialist system of wealth redistribution. After all, isn't that what those early Christians did?

Take a closer look at those passages in Acts. The “communal” arrangement was voluntary. There is no compulsion and no mention of the one institution in society that can employ compulsion legally, namely, the state.

[Acts 2:46](#) notes that this group of early Christians “broke bread in *their* homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” [emphasis added]. If they still possessed homes, some, at least, clearly did not sell everything. Those who did brought the cash from their sales to the apostles, not to any government — Roman or Jewish, secular or religious.

Christians see God as the creator of all things and, therefore, as the owner of all things. Humans are stewards of Creation, and we are called by Scripture to put it to good use. It's likely in this transcendent sense that some early Christians thought of their material wealth as not ultimately their own.

In any event, [socialism](#) is not the voluntary sharing of one's possessions. Anyone can choose to do that under socialism's antithesis, capitalism. Indeed, more philanthropy occurs in capitalist societies than in socialist ones, and the governments of capitalist countries are constantly sending “foreign aid” to the more socialist regimes, not the other way around.

Socialism is more properly understood as the concentration of political power for the purposes — through *force* — of redistributing wealth or planning an economy. Moreover, its sorry track record begins with those early Christians who chose to practice it.

The apostle Paul first alludes to financial problems among the Jerusalem group when he describes a conversation he had with its leaders — Peter, James, and John. Paul says, “All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor,” which Paul was “eager to do” ([Galatians 2:9–10](#)).

Apparently, the Jerusalem church was at the top of the “poor” list because Paul followed his request from Peter, James, and John by collecting money from the newer Christian churches in Antioch, Macedonia, and Corinth to send to “the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” ([Romans 15:26](#))

In other words, subsidies from Christians in Antioch, Macedonia, and Corinth were helping prop up the impoverished Jerusalem church. And some of these gift-giving Christians had almost nothing to live on, let alone give. For example, Paul describes how the Macedonian Christians were in “extreme poverty” and yet “gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.” ([2 Corinthians 8:2–3](#)). How desperate must the Christians in Jerusalem have been to rely on Christian brothers and sisters living in such “extreme poverty”? One cannot doubt the sincerity of the communalists, but one can certainly question how well they understood some of Christ’s teachings.

Only once did Jesus ever command anyone to sell everything, and that was when a rich ruler inquired how he could secure eternal life. To demonstrate where the man’s heart really was (which Jesus surely knew), Jesus told him to sell everything. The ruler refused and walked away. Jesus never suggested that everybody should sell everything, and he certainly never endorsed socialist, state-directed coercion to accomplish that.

Indeed, in his [parable of the talents](#), Jesus reserves the highest praise for the man whose initiative magnified material wealth, and no praise at all for the man who did nothing to create value. His [parable of the workers in the vineyard](#) provides a powerful defense of voluntary contract and private property, and his [parable of the Good Samaritan](#) ennoble the man who helps another from his own resources and his own free will. If that

Samaritan had told the desperate victim at the side of the road, “Wait for the government to show up and help you,” we would likely know him today as the “Good-for-Nothing Samaritan.”

The fact is that though some early Christians arranged their affairs in a “communal” way, most did not. In the 20 centuries since, few Christians have chosen the communal path, and most who did rejected it when it inevitably failed. The Pilgrims of Plymouth, for instance, starved until [Gov. William Bradford embraced private property](#). Utopian socialist experiments in 19th-century America, numbering more than 100 and often inspired by erroneous views of Christian ethics, all expired within a few years.

Imagine if Jesus returned today and spoke to a packed audience at Carnegie Hall, asking, “What did you do to help the poor?” Only the shallow or misguided could say he would be impressed if someone raised his hand and declared, “I voted for the politicians who said they would take care of that.”

Rather than take their cue from Bernie Sanders, Karl Marx, or even those early Jerusalem communalists, Christians and non-Christians alike ought to remember what the apostle Paul says in [2 Corinthians 9:7](#): “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

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