



DOES ACTS 2-5 TEACH SOCIALISM?

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Two articles on *The Washington Post* “On Faith” blog explicitly state that Christianity is socialist and anti-capitalist. The central argument given by both authors is that the description of the early Christian community in Acts 2-5 having “all things in common” mandates socialism (or communism). Is this true? What can be said to such a claim?

Some scholars offer an alternative argument: that the Bible’s central principles are consistent with a market economy (commonly called capitalism) and contradict a centrally-planned economy (commonly called socialism). To begin, let us define capitalism and socialism. Both are economic systems, both claim that they are best poised to advance human flourishing, but they make different claims over how resources should and can be rationed.

Capitalism is an economic system which largely allows markets to allocate scarce resources through prices, property rights and profit/loss signals. Socialism is a system under which the government owns the means of production and through coercive taxation and wealth redistribution allocates resources and makes decisions over property, prices and production. Incidentally, communism, a progression from socialism, is both a political and economic system which would abolish private property and give to individuals based on need.

But what about this claim that Acts 2-5 teaches socialism (or communism)? First of all, what do the passages say? Acts 2:44-45 says that immediately following Pentecost “⁴⁴all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as any might have need.” In Acts 4:32-35, it says of the early congregation that “not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them

[...] ³⁴For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, ³⁵lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each as any had need." It sounds like some of the language of socialism is here, so how could anyone argue otherwise? However, such a superficial reading may miss that which a closer look at the text reveals.

1. THE EARLY BELIEVERS DID NOT SELL ALL THEIR POSSESSIONS.

Even though it may seem that the phrases “had all things in common” or “selling their property” or “all things were common property” means that the early believers sold everything and had a common pot, the context immediately qualifies these general statements. The believers continued to live and meet in their own homes. Craig Blomberg says in his study *Neither Poverty nor Riches*:

[Chapter 2] Verses 43-47 are dominated by highly marked imperfect tense verbs, whereas one normally expects aorists [once-for-all actions] in historical narrative. There is no once-for-all divestiture of property in view here, but periodic acts of charity as needs arose.ⁱ

This is even clearer in Acts 4-5. In the NIV translation of Acts 4:34b-35, it says: “From time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵and put it at the apostles' feet” Blomberg commentsⁱⁱ:

Again we have a rash of imperfect verbs here, this time explicitly reflected in the NIV's ‘from time to time.’ The periodic selling of property confirms our interpretation of Acts 2:44 above. This was not a one-time divestiture of all one's possessions. The theme ‘according to need,’ reappears, too. Interestingly, what does not appear in this paragraph is any statement of complete equality among believers. Presumably, there was quite a spectrum, ranging from those who still held property which they had not sold ... all the way^l to those who were still living at a very basic level.

John Stott affirms Blomberg's conclusions on property in the early church, also underscoring Luke's use of the imperfect tense: “Neither Jesus nor his apostles forbade private property to all Christians... It is important to note that even in Jerusalem the sharing of property and possessions was voluntary... It is also noteworthy that the tense of both verbs in verse 45 is imperfect, which indicates that the selling and giving were occasional, in response to particular needs, not once and for all.”ⁱⁱⁱ N.T. Wright agrees that private property wasn't abandoned: “These early believers seem not to have sold the houses in which they lived, since they went on meeting in individual homes (2:46). Rather, they sold extra property they possessed.”^{iv}

Note the positive example of Barnabus (Acts 4) and the negative one of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). Barnabus “owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.” It does not say that this giving comprised all his possessions or that it was the only tract of land he owned. It provides a positive example of what was going on in Acts 2-4. When Barnabus saw that there were needs he could

meet, he was generous with what he owned. Perhaps, some have speculated, he was the first person of substantial wealth to donate to the cause.

Then we have the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Ananias sold “a piece of property,” (Acts 5:1) (similar to Barnabus) and, with his wife’s knowledge, kept part of the proceeds for himself. The problem with this (as we shall see) was not that they had not sold all their possessions or that they needed to give all of the proceeds of their land to the apostles, but that they lied about it. They pretended to be more generous than they were. Ananias, then later Sapphira, comes before Peter and dies (presumably as a divine judgment). Peter explicitly says that “when it was unsold it was your own” and after it was sold, it was “under your control” (vs. 4). The problem, as Peter points out, was that Ananias had “lied to the Holy Spirit” (vs. 3). He had “lied to God” and not “to men” (vs. 5).

So there is good reason to believe that the early believers did not sell all they had, but were generous and, on occasion demonstrated, they sold part of their possessions and gave the proceeds to the apostles for distribution. But even if we, for the sake of argument, grant that all believers sold all their possessions and redistributed them among the community, does that prove socialism or communism is Biblical? No, there would have to be state-coerced taking of property and forced distribution of it. But the state is not the one here selling (or giving) property to those that had need.

2. THE EARLY CHRISTIANS' SHARING WAS TOTALLY VOLUNTARY.

Karl Marx, author of *The Communist Manifesto*, views the ownership of private property as oppressive. He wanted the workers to revolt against the owners of the means of production and take control of private property. He wanted the state to own the means of production and private property abolished. Again, in this passage, there is no mention of the state at all. These early believers contributed their goods freely, without coercion, voluntarily. Elsewhere in scripture we see that Christians are even instructed to give in just this manner, freely, for “God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:8). There is plenty of indication that private property rights were still in effect (remember Barnabus, Ananias, and Sapphira). This is neither communism (abolition of private property) nor socialism (state ownership of the means of production). This was not even socialism as defined as a community-owned or regulated system. But even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that it was socialism (of some sort), why is it only here (in Acts 2-4) and not seen throughout the rest of the New Testament?

3. THIS WAS NOT A PERMANENT PRACTICE BUT A TEMPORARY MEASURE.

As we have seen, this early sharing was voluntary, without state coercion, and did not necessitate that believers give up their rights to private property. Certainly, this early sharing was noble, indicating a generosity of spirit. It is a beautiful example of love. While this type of generous giving is a permanent norm, the particular situation in Acts 2-4 seems to have been a temporary response to a particular need. We don't see a recurrence of this scenario throughout the rest of Acts, in Paul's letters, or in the rest of the

New Testament. So what was going on here? Pentecost had just happened. People of many nations were in attendance (thus the necessity of speaking in tongues). After the initial preaching by Peter and others, there were, that first day, three thousand new believers (Acts 2:41). More and more were being added to their number each day (vs. 47). Should these new believers immediately return to their homes in other parts of Israel or elsewhere? Would they not want to continue in the apostles' teaching, worship, fellowship, and prayers (vs. 42-46)? But then how could these visitors provide for themselves? How would they have enough to eat and a place to stay for an extended period?

The answer is that those who had, gave to those who had not. Eventually, most of these new believers returned home. There was no longer this extraordinary need for food and shelter. The attitude of "what's mine is yours if you need it" continued. In Acts 6, the widows were being neglected in the "daily distribution of food" and seven men were appointed to oversee that process. There was a later famine relief effort by the disciples in Acts 11:27-30. There was always a concern that the needs of the poor be met (Gal. 2:10). There were often communal meals (1 Cor. 11:20). There also were many who were wealthy and gave generously (but had not given everything away): Joseph, called Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37), Dorcas (Acts 9:36), Cornelius (Acts 10:1), Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:6-12), Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), Jason (Acts 17:5-9), Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2-3), Mnason of Cyprus (Acts 21:16), Philemon (Philemon 1), and many others. The spirit of Acts 2-5 remained, but there was no push to abolish private property and establish socialism in any form. There was a concern for equitable distribution of goods to the poor (2 Cor. 8:13-15 – the Greek *isotes* means equitable or fair) but not an egalitarian communism. In any case, the communal sharing (while retaining some private property) in Acts 2-5 was not the practice of the early church in the rest of Acts or the rest of the New Testament. But even if you think that the model of Acts 2-5 was socialist (which it was not), you have to still go further to prove your point. You have to show that the early example constitutes a mandatory command. There is a fundamental problem with this contention.

4. YOU CANNOT GET "OUGHT" OUT OF "IS".

You can't get the imperative out of the indicative. In his *Treatise* on moral philosophy, David Hume famously argues that "an unremarked transition from premises whose parts are linked only by 'is' to conclusions whose parts are linked by 'ought' ... [is] altogether inconceivable."^v In the same way, you have to show that the historical precedent in Acts 2-5 is a mandatory prescription for all later Christians. Can you get the imperative (*all Christians should do this*) from the indicative (*some early Christians did this*)? You can try with all your might, but you will never cross the divide. The fact that some Christians "shared all things" (with some qualifications) does not constitute a command that all Christians should follow their example. C.S. Lewis outlines this distinction in *The Abolition of Man*:

From propositions about fact alone no practical conclusion can ever be drawn. *This will preserve society* cannot lead to *do this* except by the mediation of *society ought to be preserved*. *This will cost you your life* cannot lead directly to *do not do this*: it can lead to it only through a felt desire or an acknowledged duty of self-preservation. The Innovator is trying to get a conclusion in the *imperative mood* out of premises in the *indicative mood*; and though he continues trying to all Eternity, he cannot succeed for the thing is impossible^{vi}.

The one way you could cross this divide is by showing that other Biblical passages command socialism.

5. INTERPRETING NARRATIVE BY DIDACTIC PASSAGES IS A WISE PRINCIPLE OF HERMENEUTICS (INTERPRETATION).

You can't make a universal command from something that was practiced in the first century unless it is taught in clear passages of Scripture elsewhere. For instance, the fact that Jesus wore a seamless robe does not mean that all future believers must do likewise (unless it is commanded elsewhere). Or does the fact that Jesus had "nowhere to lay his head" (no home) mean that all believers thereafter must be homeless? R.C. Sproul explains how Christians must interpret Biblical narratives through the lens of broader Christian teaching: "We must interpret the narrative passages of Scripture by the didactic or 'teaching' portions. If we try to find too much theology in narrative passages, we can easily go beyond the point of the narrative into serious errors."^{vii} Unless there is clear teaching that makes mandatory (a command) a historical precedent in Jesus' life or the early church, then it is not binding on later believers. Thus, even if Acts 2-5 was socialism (which it is not), it would hold nothing other than historical interest to later believers. It would have no binding power on the later church.

C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man; or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of School* (Oxford: Collier, 1947), 42.

CONCLUSION

So in order to show that Acts 2-5 teaches socialism, you would have to show that Acts 2-5 teaches that:

1. All believers in Jerusalem sold all their possessions and put them in a communal pot which was then controlled by the state (the distinctive mark of socialism);
2. Private property rights (upheld through the rest of Scripture) were abolished or discouraged by this passage;
3. The voluntary giving demonstrated by individuals in this passage gives the state the right to coerce people to give up their property (socialism);
4. The pattern shown here was not temporary but permanent. It was the rule in the rest of the New Testament;
5. That you can get "ought" out of "is," the imperative from the indicative, a necessary mandate from a historical example;
6. There is clear teaching that entails government ownership of the means of production, coercive taxation and wealth redistribution (socialism) in the rest of Scripture.

Wise teachers have maintained that it is not good to base an important doctrine on a single passage of Scripture. But if you do so, surely in that passage the doctrine should be taught. Not only is socialism not taught in Acts 2-5, it is impossible (without meeting the above conditions) to show that it does so.

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ⁱ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches* (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity Press, 1999), 162, 165.

ⁱⁱ Ron Sider also looks to the Greek tenses and draws a similar conclusion on the early church:

The earliest church did not insist on absolute economic equality. Nor did they abolish private property...The tense of the Greek words confirms this interpretation. In both 2:45 and 4:34, the verbs denote continued, repeated action over an extended period of time. Thus the meaning is "they often sold possessions," or "they were in the habit of regularly bringing the proceeds of what was being sold." The text does not suggest that the community abolished all private property or that everyone immediately sold everything. It suggests instead that over a period of time, whenever there was need, believers sold lands and houses to aid the needy.

Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 78-9.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press Academic, 1994), 83-4.

^{iv} N.T. Wright, *Acts: 24 Studies for Individuals and Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 23.

^v Cohon, Rachel, "Hume's Moral Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/hume-moral/>.

^{vi} C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man; or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of School* (Oxford: Collier, 1947), 42.

^{vii} R.C. Sproul. *Discovering the God who Is: His Character and Being, His Power and Personality* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light Publications, 2008), 116.