

Q. Were Early Christians Communists?

A. This question is largely based on Acts 2:44, "All who believed were together, and had all things in common," and Acts 4:32, "The multitude of those who believed were of one heart and soul. Not one of them claimed that anything of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common." These verses have led some people to teach that early Christians practiced communism, and that modern Christians should return to practicing and promoting communism. Other Christians vehemently deny this and say that the Bible promotes capitalism. Who's right?

What Is Communism?

The Auburn University website gives three concise definitions of communism. The first definition begins with this sentence: "Any ideology based on the communal ownership of all property and a classless social structure, with economic production and distribution to be directed and regulated by means of an authoritative economic plan that supposedly embodies the interests of the community as a whole" ("A Glossary of Political Economy Terms" s.v. "Communism") (<http://www.auburn.edu/~johnspm/gloss/communism>).

As the above sentence hints, just about any reference about communism will address communal ownership of property, classless social structure, and common ownership or control of the means of production. Also, while communism claims that its ultimate goal is a stateless society, its means of achieving that goal are always through a strongly authoritarian state. The name most often connected with communism is Karl Marx. Marx did not invent communism, but he did synthesize several social and economic theories into what is often called Marxism.

Auburn University's second definition for communism specifically addresses Marxist-Leninist socialism. This variant of socialism believes that "a truly communist society can be achieved only through the violent overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'" (ibid.). According to this ideology, even the future

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idealized society would be "under the authoritarian guidance of a hierarchical and disciplined Communist Party" (ibid.). Their third definition for communism deals with the "world-wide revolutionary political movement inspired by the October Revolution (Red Oktober) in Russia in 1917" (ibid.).

Communism equates the ownership of private property with the abuse of one's fellow man: "In communism, the end of relations based on force, on violence and the universal antagonism of each against all ... will presuppose the end of ownership rights over people and things. The abolition of private property means putting an end to their foundations: the domination of the 'other' (man or nature)... One will no longer be able to 'use and abuse' something, whatever it is, just because one owns it. Nothing will belong to anybody anymore" ("Communism: points for consideration - L'Insecurite Sociale") (<http://libcom.org/library/communism-points-consideration-linsecurite-sociale>).

In other words, you have no right to own something. The state or the Communist Party is supposed to take it from you and see that it is made equally available to anyone who wants to use it.

This idea, by the way, has become extremely popular today concerning intellectual property. Have you ever heard people call for the abolition of copyrights, trademarks, and patents? These people want the creators of software, books, music, videos, and inventions to be forced to share their work freely. Of course, if the creator of a work *wants* to share a work freely (as I do with the articles on this site because of Christ's admonition in Matthew 10:8), that is his or her choice. But it is quite another matter to have the government force this on someone. There is an interesting article on this subject here: "Public Goods and Intellectual Property Rights" (<http://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs201/projects/communism-computing-china/intelproperty.html>).

According to communism, you have no more claim to the fruit of your labor—be it the new car that you saved for from your paycheck or the royalties from your book—than the person who has never worked a day in his life. Of course, you might call his desire for your goods covetousness and the state's appropriation of them theft. According to the Bible, you would be right.

Does the Bible Teach Communism?

The Old Covenant that God made with Israel forbade theft and covetousness (see Exodus 20:15 and 17). The New Covenant, which is for believers, also forbids theft and covetousness. Among those things that defile a man, Jesus lists "thefts, covetings, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires" (Mark 7:21-22). Paul rightly boasted, "I coveted no one's silver, or gold, or clothing" (Acts 20:33). To covet is to desire what belongs to another. Theft is taking what belongs to another. For the Bible to contain these concepts, it is logically implying that property can be privately owned so that it does not belong to everyone else. Contrary to the communist claim that owning private property abuses others, Romans 13:9 teaches that coveting and stealing are contrary to loving one's neighbor. In 1 Corinthians 6:10, we learn that neither thieves nor the covetous "will inherit the Kingdom of God."

The communist claim that the community has a right to the property of the individual, whether that property is physical or intellectual, is directly at odds with the Bible's allowance that property can be privately owned and that others do not have a right to it. Notice that I used the word "allowance." The Bible does not teach or promote the complex, modern concept of capitalism. God sees private property as natural. But we are not obeying God or furthering the Gospel merely by owning property. So, if a state were to take our property away, we cannot invoke the rule that we ought to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29) so that we can disobey the state. We must follow Romans 13:1, 5 and "be in subjection to the higher authorities." Yes, communism encourages people to covet and steal under the protection of the state. The Bible never says, however, that it is the Christian's responsibility to stop sin in society at large (see 1 Corinthians 5:11-13).

If modern communism's idea of having goods in common is covetousness and theft, what, then, were the early Christians doing when they had all things in common?

What the Early Christians Practiced

Let's take another look at the Scriptures that speak of the early Christians as having their goods in common. Speaking of the believers soon after Pentecost, Luke says, "All who believed were together, and had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods, and distributed them to all, according as anyone had need" (Acts 2:44-45). What exactly "were together" means is debatable since verse 46 says

they broke bread "at home." Since it's not necessary to our discussion, we'll skip it.

What "all things in common" means in verse 44 is made clear by verse 45. The owners of "possessions" (*ktēma*—"lands," "estates," what is legally called "real property") and "goods" (*huparxis*—"movable property," "personal property") sold them and distributed "them" (apparently the proceeds of the sale) to "all" (meaning all of the brethren) according to their need. Clearly, there were brethren in need, and those who could supply that need were putting their love into action. Those who had this world's goods did not want to see their brethren go in need.

We see this in practice in Acts 4:34-37:

For neither was there among them any who lacked, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet, and distribution was made to each, according as anyone had need. Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas (which is, being interpreted, Son of Encouragement), a Levite, a man of Cyprus by race, having a field, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Two things stand out in these accounts from Acts 2 and 4. First, no one—not the apostles, and certainly not the state or the Communist Party—forced anyone to sell his property and bring the proceeds for distribution. Second, the fact that these believers were selling their property shows that they believed in private property. These two points are seen more clearly in the next chapter.

In Acts 5, we read that a husband and wife named Ananias and Sapphira sold their real property (*ktēma*). Instead of bringing all of the money from the sale to the apostles, they brought only part of it, but misrepresented to the apostles that it was all of the proceeds. Not because they kept back part of the sale, but because they lied about it, God caused them to drop dead. While they were still living, Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back part of the price of the land? While you kept it, didn't it remain your own? After it was sold, wasn't it in your power [*exousia*—"authority"]. How is it that you have conceived this thing in your heart? You haven't lied to men, but to God" (verses 3 and 4).

Notice that Peter said that while the property remained in Ananias' possession, it was his. And even after Ananias sold it, the money was under Ananias' authority. This tells us that the selling and distribution of property was entirely voluntary, and it also shows that Peter and the early believers fully respected the concept of private property.

If we had to pinpoint one distinction between modern communism and the practice of the early Christians, it was that their concepts of having goods in common come from two entirely different points of view. Modern communism comes from the point of view of the person coveting another's goods: You have what I want, and I'm going to use the power of the state to take it. The early Christians, on the other hand, looked at it from the viewpoint of those who had the goods: These are my goods over which I have full authority; you do not have a legal claim to them, but I see that you have need so, acting in love, I will voluntarily share them with you. Communism is motivated by base covetousness; the Christian practice of "having goods in common" is motivated by Godly love.

Preaching Socialism

Advocating various forms of socialism, including Marxist-Leninist socialism, is very trendy in many pulpits and Christian publications. In a document on the Vatican's website, the Catholic Church writes,

Among the numerous implications of the common good, immediate significance is taken on by the principle of the universal destination of goods.... The universal right to use the goods of the earth is based on the principle of the universal destination of goods. Each person must have access to the level of well-being necessary for his full development. The right to the common use of goods is the "first principle of the whole ethical and social order".... "All other rights, whatever they are, including property rights and the right of free trade must be subordinated to this norm [the universal destination of goods]".... If it is true that everyone is born with the right to use the goods of the earth, it is likewise true that, in order to ensure that this right is exercised in an equitable and orderly fashion, regulated interventions are necessary, interventions that are the result of national and international agreements, and a juridical order that adjudicates and specifies the exercise of this right.

"Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church"
paragraphs 171-3
(http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_comp_endio-dott-soc_en.html)

The Catholic Church is clearly calling for national and international socialism that denies individual property rights in favor of what it calls the "universal destination of goods." And it wants that socialism enforced by "regulated interventions," that is, the state intervening in your right to own goods. We would be foolish to believe that the Catholic Church is merely saying these things, and that it is not actively trying to bring them about.

What Should We Do Today?

The same principles that governed the early Christians still hold true today. The Bible does not teach or promote either modern communism or modern capitalism. It allows our right to our private property. On the other hand, if we see a brother in need, we are not to turn our backs: "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and closes his heart of compassion against him, how does the love of God remain in him?" (1 John 3:17). John the Baptist taught, "He who has two coats, let him give to him who has none. He who has food, let him do likewise" (Luke 3:11).

I discuss Christian giving in more detail in the article, "What the Bible Says About Tithing and Christian Giving" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/giving.html>). The Bible does not call for either the state or the church to force giving on anyone, yet Paul told Timothy, "Charge those who are rich in this present world that they not be haughty, nor have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches, but on the living God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, that they be ready to distribute, willing to communicate [*koinōnikos*—"have things in common," "share"]" (1 Timothy 6:17-18). Let's realize, too, that most people (not all) living in developed countries today would be considered rich by Paul's standards.

The Bible does not order us to hold our goods in common, and it does not say that the early brethren in areas outside of Jerusalem, and perhaps Antioch, (such as Ephesus, Philippi, Galatia, etc.) followed this practice. What is important is that we do not turn our backs on those

in need. As born again Christians who have the spiritual eyes to see the kingdom of God, we should understand that what we call our goods are ultimately God's. He owns everything, and we are merely His stewards. Thus, we should use His goods as He would—in love.

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