

Does the Book of Acts Teach Socialism?

By Dr. Art Lindsley



"A truly strange thing has happened to American Christianity," [Gregory Paul](#) writes for *The Washington Post's* "On Faith" blog. He claims that Christians who defend the free market are in a profound contradiction because Acts 2-5 is "outright socialism of the type described millennia later by Marx — who likely got the general idea from the Gospels."

Does Acts 2-5 really command socialism? A quick reading of these chapters might make it seem so. [Acts 2:44-45](#) says that immediately following Pentecost, "[A]ll who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need." And [Acts 4:32-35](#), referring to the early congregation, says,

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Though these passages may sound like socialism to the average reader, such a superficial reading may miss what a closer examination of the text reveals. There are three major reasons why Acts 2-5 does not teach socialism.

This is not an example of true communal sharing. — Acts 2-5 portrays a *spirit* of communal sharing rather than an actual commune. The people did not sell everything they owned to legal title, as those typically do in a commune. This is evidenced by the imperfect verbs used throughout the passages. 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."

This point is even clearer in Acts 4-5. The NIV translation of [Acts 4:34b-35](#) says, "From time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet." Blomberg comments:

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.

[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.

There is also sufficient reason to believe that the early followers of Christ did not sell all they had, but rather occasionally sold part of their possessions and gave the proceeds to the apostles for distribution. For example, in Acts 5, Ananias sold a piece of property (v. 1) and kept a portion of the proceeds for himself and his wife, Sapphira. The problem was not that they were required to sell their possessions and give all of the proceeds of their land to the apostles, but that Ananias lied about the true price he received for the land (v. 7). Peter points out that he could give or keep the money as he saw fit (v. 4) but still lied to Peter and to the Holy Spirit (v. 5).

But even if, for the sake of argument, we grant that all believers sold all their possessions and redistributed them among the community, this still would not prove socialism is biblical. The next two reasons explain why.

The act in Acts was totally voluntary — Socialism implies coercion by the state, but these early believers contributed their goods freely. There is no mention of the state in Acts 2-5. Elsewhere in scripture we see that Christians are even instructed to give in just this manner, freely, for "God loves a cheerful giver" ([2 Cor. 9:8](#)). Even if the believers sold all their possessions and redistributed them among the community, this still would not prove socialism is biblical, since the state is not the agent selling property to those in need. There is also plenty of indication that private property rights were still in effect, therefore this was not even be considered socialism if the term were used to refer to a regulated system of community ownership.

The narrative was not a universal command. — To prove Acts 2-5 commands socialism, you

would have to show that this historical precedent is a mandatory prescription for all later Christians. You cannot get the imperative (all Christians should do this) from the indicative (some early Christians did this). The fact that some Christians "shared all things" does not constitute a command that all Christians should follow their example, because it is not clearly taught in passages of Scripture elsewhere.

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."

The communal sharing in Acts 2-5 was not the practice of the early church in the rest of the New Testament, so it is clear that this practice is not a mandatory command. Thus, even if Acts 2-5 was socialism, it would hold nothing other than historical interest to later believers and would have no binding power on the later church.

Certainly, the communal sharing illustrated in Acts 2-5 was a beautiful picture of generosity and love. But it is impossible to show that these passages teach socialism given their temporary, voluntary, and strictly narrative nature.

Note: A longer treatment of this subject by Dr. Lindsley can be found [here](#).