

Socialism In America: Where It Began And Failed

What we often do not hear regarding the history of Thanksgiving is the other side of the story. The Pilgrims faced dire problems due to certain decisions that they made. For example, during their first winter in Plymouth, half of them died, and famine was the norm for the first two years:

"1621 was a famine year.

In his History of Plymouth Plantation, the governor of the colony, William Bradford, reported that the colonists went hungry for years because they refused to work in the field. They preferred instead to steal food. He says the colony was riddled with 'corruption,' and with 'confusion and discontent.' The crops were small because 'much was stolen both by night and day, before it became scarce eatable.'

In the harvest feasts of 1621 and 1622, 'all had their hungry bellies filled,' but only briefly. The prevailing condition during those years was not the abundance the usual story claims, it was famine and death.

But in subsequent years something changes. The harvest of 1623 was different. Suddenly, 'instead of famine now God gave them plenty,' Bradford wrote, 'and the face of things was changed, to the rejoicing of the hearts of many, for which they blessed God.' Thereafter, he wrote, 'any general want or famine hath not been amongst them since to this day.' In fact, in 1624, so much food was produced that the colonists were able to begin exporting corn.

Video of the sermon

What happened? After the poor harvest of 1622, writes

Bradford, 'they began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could, and obtain a better crop.' They began to question their form of economic organization.

Until this time they had required that 'all profits & benefits that are got by trade, traffic, trucking, working, fishing, or any other means' were to be placed in the common stock of the colony, and that, 'all such persons as are of this colony, are to have their meat, drink, apparel, and all provisions out of the common stock.' A person was to put into the common stock all he could, and take only what he needed.

It sounds like 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.' They were practicing an early form of socialism, and that is why the Pilgrims were starving. Bradford writes that 'young men that were most able and fit for labor and service' complained about being forced to 'spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children.' Also, 'the strong, or man of parts, had no more in division of victuals and clothes, than he that was weak.' So the young and strong refused to work and the total amount of food produced was never adequate.

To rectify this situation, in 1623 Bradford abolished socialism. He gave each household a parcel of land and told them they could keep what they produced, or trade it away as they saw fit. In other words, he replaced socialism with a free market, and that was the end of the famines.

Many early groups of colonists set up socialist states, all with the same terrible results. At Jamestown, out of every shipload of settlers that arrived, less than half would survive their first twelve months in America. Most of the work was being done by only one-fifth of the men, the other four-fifths choosing to be parasites. In the winter of 1609–10, called "The Starving Time," the population fell from five-hundred to sixty. But when the Jamestown colony was converted to a free market, the results were every bit as dramatic as

those at Plymouth." [Mises.org](https://mises.org)

So, the first socialist experiments in America were abject failures. The question then is, why are we following those paths of failure rather than the road of success? The mistake they made was a misinterpretation of Scripture. We read of the early church in Acts 2:44-45, "And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need."

Many have concluded that the early church was practicing a form of socialism where no one owned anything individually but held all things in common. But look at what the text itself actually says, "sold their possessions and goods." These were things they actually owned. And further investigation shows that these sales of goods and possessions were completely voluntary. Look at Acts 5:3-4, "But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whilst it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." So the property sold belonged to Ananias, he had the power to keep the property or once he sold it to keep the proceeds for himself and his wife. His sin was in lying about how much he was giving, not the fact that he did not give the whole proceeds of the sale of that land. Socialism was not being practiced by the early church, rather it was voluntary generosity was on full display.

The problem with socialism is that it is a violation of God's Law, the eighth commandment: Thou shalt not steal. Property is a God-given right. One element of that right is the right to keep the fruits of your own labor. This is another reason why slavery, unless it is voluntary or due to bankruptcy, is against God's Law. Slavery is stealing the fruits of another man's labor, a violation of the eighth commandment.

As we have been studying Philemon, the Apostle Paul's epistle to his disciple Philemon, we have seen the clear arguments against slavery clearly established. Paul was telling Philemon that he ought to emancipate his slave Onesimus, which history tells us he did in response to this epistle.

We find that both Philemon and Onesimus went on to do great things for the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are heroes of the Christian Faith, heroes we do well to emulate.

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