

Reflections on All Things in Common

READINGS

The major challenge to the free enterprise system we have is that of socialism, and we need to take a moment to consider whether the evil side effects of money would be reduced under socialist leadership. It is a tempting proposition. If we could just get the production out of the hands of those greedy capitalists and let the people run it, the workers, the ordinary people. It sounds good. The capitalist system runs on the premise that the individual desires to maximize his return on investment; that if risks are taken those who assume the risks should be rewarded proportionately higher than those who take no risks but simply labor for the corporation. At first glance it looks as though the greed that fuels much of the capitalist system could be eliminated under government and/or worker ownership of the major parts of production.

But if we consider the teachings of the Bible about how people behave with respect to money, socialism does not seem to be the cure to the polarity of money. The first weakness in the socialist system is that sainthood, wisdom, and restraint are not conferred in greater measure upon governments or employees than on owners. No thinking Christian can accept



Detail of "100 Guilder Print " Etching by Rembrandt

a premise that some classes or groups are more saintly than others. Sin is a human phenomenon from which no one is exempt. Socialist countries seem to have a large measure of economic sin too. People get ripped off, an elitist class comes to the front, and productivity is not noticeably better. In fact, it is usually worse.

A second source of evil in the socialist system, where the government owns and operates the major areas of production, is the concentration of power. When political power and economic power are in the hands of the same people, the potential for corruption is greatly increased. Power corrupts, and one of the reasons that this country has had such long-term high morality in many areas is because there has been not only a separation of powers in the three basic areas of government but also a separation of economic and political power.

—Allen Hollis, in *The Bible and Money*, pp. 124-125¹

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There is no one economic lifestyle prescribed in the New Testament.

That statement will disappoint some of my friends and be disputed by them. They argue that the Biblical position is the *renunciation* of wealth and either a shared, communal style of living or a deliberate choice to live at a bare subsistence level.

They point to the early church and its initial instinct to share material possessions. (See Acts 2:43-47 and 4:32-35) There we read that "there was not a needy person among them." And again, "All who believed were together, and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need." It is important, however, to note that the tense of the verbs is imperfect, implying that as needs arose someone reached out to meet the need. All the Christians did not necessarily sell all their possessions. And whatever they did, they did voluntarily, not under the compulsion of an order. (If this were not true, the actions of

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Ananias and Sapphira, recorded in Acts 5:1-11, would not be understandable.)

No, we are not told in the New Testament precisely how to deal with our money. We are told that material things are both necessary and good. We are told that God cares about our material needs—that as we seek His Kingdom our needs will be met.

We are warned about the “deceitfulness of riches,” the danger of falling in love with money and its acquisition. We are admonished to care for the poor, to strive for justice and fairness in all our dealings. We are asked to give, not a “tithe,” but generously, liberally, as God has given to us. But we are not given a prescription.

—Walden Howard in “Money. . .” an Editorial,
Faith/at/Work, August 1975, p. 2¹

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The early church shared all things
and knew the power of praise
we are swayed by the siren song of money
and let our prayers die on our lips

The early church treasured each member
and knew the joy of community
we are blinded by the neon sign of the dollar
and are not able to see our brothers' plight

The early church valued fellowship
and knew the favor of all
we are harassed by the care of our possessions
and our image lies tarnished and dull

Lois Shank Hertzler²

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Dear Don,

There is no question but that we have made money into a God. Even when we recognize this we go on to say that money gives power, money corrupts, money talks. Money does not do one of these things. Money is lifeless. It has no psychic energy of its own. How could it? the wise man would ask. It is only useless paper and metal. The problem is not money and the power it bestows, but me and the power I bestow - the capacity of the human being to deposit bits of himself out there. If I can take back my own power I will know that I am the creator and I can make money into my servant as well as my master. The problem that we are dealing with is in me and in you and not in money. At root it is a spiritual problem. How am I going to deal with the matter of my idolatry? Why do I have this particular idol, and will it do for me the things I think it will do? Why do I believe more in money than in Christianity? Why do I want to use money to win power for myself? Why do I want to use money to influence people? What are my fears: hunger? death? rejection? Will money save me from my fears or will Christianity? If the answer is Christianity, why has it had so little power to save us? What has sent me whoring after other Gods—seemingly more powerful?

My own conviction is that fear is at the basis of our misuse of money, and that this fear is in me and that it is in you, and that this fear is running the world. The problem is not our intellectual life, which is well convinced of the one God, but our emotional life out of which all action issues.

One of the troubles may be that Christianity has preached the evil of money and not created an accepting atmosphere in which persons could make confession. "Confess your sins to each other, pray for one another, that you may be healed." Each of us thinks that we are the only one who counts our gold in the middle of the night.

We are so afraid that if we confess others will not like us. The opposite is true. Wherever a person truly confesses, love flows and community is established. Love alone casts out fear, and God's love is mediated through persons. If this were not true,

he would not have had to send a Son, who now sends us. If I love you, I will care for you. It will not be a matter of "I ought to," or "I must," but "I want to." That is the nature of love. Behind our fear is the fact that we are not exercising our capacity for intimacy and communion, our capacity to build communities. To separated, isolated, lonely and alienated persons we are preaching a gospel of the sharing of our money, as though that can happen without the sharing of ourselves.

The early Christian community held all possessions in common because they held themselves in common. They shared themselves, and because they shared themselves, they came to love each other, and because they came to love each other, they lost their fear, and because they lost their fear, they gave freely of their possessions.

The fault is not in our money, which might be a fairly good means of exchange, but in ourselves. The beginning of community is the creation of a climate in which we can each say who we think we are, so that we can find out who we really are, and thus make ever a fuller and fuller confession. "Confess your faults to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed."

These are a few of the things that cross my mind, Don, when I think about the power that I have given to money, and how I might reclaim it.

Love,
Elizabeth ¹

QUESTIONS

1. Persons observing the first century church said in amazement, "See how these Christian love one another!" Could this be said of your church? What steps could be taken to make the modern church more of a loving community?

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2. In what ways is your church like a "family"? What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking of the church as an extended family?

3. What are some practical ways in which modern church members might share their material goods with one another as an expression of love? Why would it be difficult to convince many members that this is a legitimate function of church membership?

4. The sharing of all goods in common ("communism") has been tried by many small religious communities in the past. What are the advantages and disadvantages of handling material goods in this way?

5. What are some of the ways we can include our money and possessions in our life together in the church? Under what conditions are we justified in thinking of our wealth as "private and personal"?

MEDITATION

"In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." (Proverbs 3:6)

Seeking you, holy Lord, I breathe deeply, still my thoughts, and quiet my emotions. Your healing power touches my consciousness, refreshing and restoring it. Your love illumines every part of my being and peace is real.

Silence

Act through my higher self to direct my path. If I have buried anger or expressed it destructively, help me release it constructively. If resentment festers within, enlarge my capacity to forgive. If insecurity or selfishness make me unwilling or afraid to share, teach me trust and humility. Through prayer, your word, your spirit, and the companionship of others, guide us all to grow in wisdom and understanding.

Help all people to know that your love is at the center of all life. Let it radiate through me to others, and let me receive others' gifts with warm appreciation. Be present in my giving and receiving, holy Lord, today and always.



Paul. 11th century mosaic. Hossios Loukas Monastery, Greece.