

2009

Was the Jerusalem church Communistic?

by Bill Lockwood

A leader of the Communist Party, U.S.A. stated in a television interview that the New Testament teaches the political theory of communism. This echoes the statements of others pertaining to the church in Jerusalem found in Acts 4:32, "*the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul, and not one of them said that aught of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things common.*" They ask, 'Isn't this communism in practice?' A careful reading of the Bible plus a better understanding of the theories of communism will keep us from making such a mistake. Consider the following five differences.

First, there is nothing to indicate that *all* the members of the Jerusalem church had "all things common." Paul later commented to the Romans that he was collecting a contribution from the churches of Asia for the "poor among the saints that were at Jerusalem" (Acts 15:26). Evidently, there was no equalization of property in the church.

Second, all the members of the church in Jerusalem were *volunteers* to the Lord's service. The gospel teaches "whosoever will." This is very much *unlike* the economic practice of communism which forces its citizens to be members whether they like it or not and the taxes are levied (read, *stolen*) regardless of one's feelings on the matter. However, any member of the churches of Christ in the New Testament was free to stay or leave if he or she so desired.

Third, not only was membership of free will, but all of the giving in the Jerusalem church was purely *voluntary*. Even more than that, in Acts 5:3-9 we read that Ananias and Sapphira sold land and brought money to the apostles for distribution among the saints. They kept back part of the price of the sale—but that was not their sin! The problem was that they "lied unto God" about how much they received. Peter asked them, "*While it (land, bl) remained was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your power? You have not lied unto men, but unto God.*" The right to private property is very clear.

Fourth, Bales also points out that "having all things common" was not practiced by other congregations of the Roman world. If it had been, it would have been impossible for each disciple to determine according to his ability to send relief to saints in Jerusalem as instructed in Acts 11:27. For, if each gave his all when he came into the church and continued to give what he got thereafter, no one would be able to make any such individual decision. Further, Paul wrote to the Corinthians to lay by "in store" their finances on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1-2) and Christians are not to give "grudgingly nor of necessity, but as cheerful givers" (2 Corinthians 8-9).

Fifth, the grand principle which moved those of the first-century to give to the poor was love. There was no force, no conscription, and no system of heavy-handed graduated taxation. The Christian is to love his neighbor as himself (Matthew 22:39). The church of our Lord in Jerusalem and throughout the Roman Empire was a great example of faithful Christians freely giving from a loving heart as was taught by our Savior.