

## CAPITALISM IN THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

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Many evangelical leaders today teach that the Bible does not favor the capitalist, free enterprise system. Rather, they say, the government should take care of the poor, the widows and orphans, providing for them. People who amass wealth are selfish and harmful, building their luxurious comfort on the backs of the poor and oppressed. Only the power of the state can rectify this injustice, taxing the rich and distributing to the poor. These evangelicals often prefer to word “progressive” to “socialist,” but their underlying philosophy is the same.

Indeed, the Bible does teach us to pity and help the poor, to relieve the oppressed, to bring justice to all. Is the capitalist system indeed at fault; does it need to be changed or limited? While modern socialism as a system developed later, the Westminster Assembly was aware of the concept, and in several places addressed this issue. Since everything the Assembly wrote was to be based on Scripture, the Westminster Standards provide a good summary of the biblical teaching related to capitalism.

### **Earlier Attempts at Collectivism**

In most societies historically property, whether land or movable property, was directly owned either by individuals or by the ruler. The idea of common ownership of property was an idea only. The most famous classic description of such a society was in Plato’s *Republic*.<sup>1</sup> While Aristotle also believed in a largely totalitarian state, he rejected the communism of Plato, allowing for private ownership of property.<sup>2</sup> As a disciple of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas favored the idea of communism as an impossible ideal, suitable only for humans in a sinless state.<sup>3</sup> A well known later writer favoring communism was Sir Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor under King Henry VIII, who glowingly described an imaginary communist society of four million people on an island nation.<sup>4</sup> He is the one who coined the term “utopia” (from the Greek for “good place”) for such an idealized society.

While it may have been easy for philosophers to describe an imaginary ideal communist society, such communities were rare before the Westminster Assembly. The most common form of a communistic community had been groups living together with a strong religious purpose. The Jewish Essene sect was such a community. Denying both marriage and private property, they were sustained only through new disciples coming in, bringing their property to the common purse.<sup>5</sup> In this regard the Essenes foreshadowed the monastic movement of the Middle Ages. These communities denied personal property to individuals and held assets in common,

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic* 4:416-417; 5:464; also in his *Critias* 110-112.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 2:4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1:98:1, rep. 3.

<sup>4</sup> More, *Utopia* (1516).

<sup>5</sup> Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 8:11, quoting Philo, *Apology for the Jews*.

but they were not seeking to change the world to an ideal society, but rather were trying to escape the world. In that sense they differed from the communistic ideal of the philosophers.

Many have thought that the early Christian church practiced communism. For instance, one writer states, “The condition of Plato’s imagined guardians was not so different from that of Jesus’ disciples as recounted in the Book of Acts.”<sup>6</sup> However, careful examination of the text reveals that, rather than practicing communism, the early disciples were practicing extraordinary generosity—there is a difference!

First, it is clear that the people kept their property when they joined the church, as was stated in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in the immediate context.<sup>7</sup> That same verse states that they were killed, not for keeping their property, but for lying to the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Barnabas sold his field and donated the money to the church long after he joined the church.<sup>8</sup> The gifts of property for the poor in the church were just that, gifts. They came from people who still owned their own property.

Second, the giving and distributing of these gifts did not occur all at once, but rather as needs were arising. This is made clear by the Greek tense involved throughout both passages in Acts. Normally past events are related in the aorist tense, but in these accounts the much more unusual imperfect tense is used. The imperfect tense has the idea of continual or repeated action in the past. Here is a very wooden translation:

Now all the believers were together and were having all things common, and they were selling (their) possessions and (their) goods and they were distributing them to all, whoever was having need. . . . Now there was of the multitude of believers one heart and soul, and not one was saying that anything of his possessions was his own, but all things were common to them. . . . For there was not anyone needy among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses, selling (them), were bringing the proceeds of the things sold and were laying (them) at the feet of the apostles; and they were distributing (them) according to anyone as he was having need.

All the underlined verbs are in the imperfect tense in Greek. Note that needs were arising continually, people were selling properties continually,<sup>9</sup> people were bringing the prices continually, and the apostles were distributing continually. People were not required to give up their property to join the church; rather, they generously were giving property to meet ongoing needs in the church as those needs arose. Those who claim that Acts records a Christian communism are mistaken. This community provides a fine example of extraordinary charity in a unique historical situation.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World*, ed. by Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 1:1049. The account of this so-called “Christian communism” is in Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 5:4.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 4:36-37.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek for “selling” in its second occurrence is a present participle, which therefore takes on the force of the main verb (“were bringing”), which is in the imperfect tense.

The Westminster divines no doubt were aware of an infamous attempt at a communist society in Protestant Europe. In 1534 the Dutch radical reformer John of Leyden took control of the nearby German city of Münster. He sought to establish an eschatological utopia. He outlawed private property, instituted communism, introduced polygamy, and had himself proclaimed king of Münster; he lasted only about a year before being conquered by the surrounding army. His brief reign ended with his torture and death, along with widespread grief and desolation. This experiment in practical communism greatly tarnished the reputation of the radical reformation; even peaceful Anabaptists suffered for it.

Another experiment closer to the time of the Westminster Assembly took place in the Pilgrim colony in America at Plymouth. When the Pilgrims first landed in 1620, they established a communist system. However, before long that system proved itself a failure, and they switched to a free enterprise system, with excellent results. Unlike the Münster experiment, Plymouth provided an ideal test, with committed pious individuals with one united purpose. Yet even with that advantage, the system failed. The colony's governor, William Bradford later wrote his account of the colony, in which he described this experiment.

The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato's and other ancients applauded by some of later times; and that the taking away of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God. For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. . . . I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them.

At length, after much debate of things, the Governor (with the advice of the chiefest amongst them) gave way that they should set corn every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves. . . . This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content.<sup>10</sup>

According to Bradford's chronology these events occurred in 1623, twenty years before the Westminster Assembly met. However, Bradford did not publish his history until 1650, several years after the close of the Assembly. It is not known whether any of the Westminster divines knew of this American experiment in Christian communism, but it is possible, since there was correspondence between the colonists and their families and friends in England. At least it is evident that such communistic notions would have been familiar to some Puritans, as they were to the Pilgrims.

### ***Westminster View of Property***

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<sup>10</sup> William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. by Harvey Wish (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), 90-91. The order of the paragraphs is reversed, as Bradford first wrote of his solution and then explained the problem behind it.

The Westminster Standards are not silent about personal or social economics. They clearly maintain the rights and responsibilities of private property ownership, and they deny a collective system. These positions favor the capitalist, free-enterprise system. Four major areas in the Standards speak to this issue: humans' place in the creation, the commands regarding killing and stealing, the duties of the civil magistrate, and the communion of the saints.

### **The place of humans in the creation**

In agreement with traditional Christian theology the Westminster divines considered humans as unique creatures in the creation, distinct from the angels and distinct from the animals. Unlike the angels, humans possess a material body. And, unlike the animals, humans possess an immaterial soul or spirit.

How did God create man? Ans. After God had made all other creatures, he created man male and female; formed the body of the man of the dust of the ground, and the woman of the rib of the man, endued them with living, reasonable, and immortal souls; made them after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it, with dominion over the creatures; yet subject to fall.<sup>11</sup>

Since humans are distinct from other creatures, their relation to the creation is different. All three Standards at this place describe this relation with the phrase that humans were given "dominion over the creatures." At this point the Larger Catechism provides as a proof text Gen 1:28, "have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Earlier in the same answer the Larger Catechism had stated that humans were created "after his [God's] own image," citing Gen 1:26. It can be shown that the divines linked being created in God's image with humanity's place as ruler over creation by comparing these Larger Catechism proof texts with those provided in the Confession. The Confession does not use the phrase "after his own image," but it does have the statement about dominion over the creatures. However, as its proof text for that latter statement it cites both verses, Gen 1:26 and 28. By citing verse 26 as well as verse 28, they showed that they believed that humans' being made in God's image results in human dominion over the creatures.

In order for humans to fulfill the image of God, they were to exercise dominion over the creatures. This dominion includes stewardship of the earth and its creatures, caring and increasing its productivity, regulating its use, and managing its development. God governs his creation in providence; Adam and Eve and their descendents were to govern the creation on earth as his vice regents. The Westminster Standards expand this point in their discussion of the creation covenant, the "covenant of works."<sup>12</sup>

The Larger Catechism describes this covenant as follows:

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<sup>11</sup> WLC 17; the Larger Catechism is more detailed on this point than the Confession and the Shorter Catechism are (cf. WCF 4:2; WSC 10).

<sup>12</sup> WCF 7:2; WLC 20; WSC 12. The Confession calls it a "covenant of works," while the Catechisms call it a "covenant of life."

Q. 20. What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created? Ans. The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with himself; instituting the Sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.

Note that this catechism answer makes it clear that Adam and Eve were given a full slate of duties in this covenant. Regarding the land, he was to “dress it” and to “eat of the fruit of the earth,” as well as to exercise “dominion” over the creatures. The “dressing” of the land refers to the biblical commands to “work” and “guard” the ground, to produce crops. His “eating of the fruit of the earth” refers to his enjoying the produce of the land. If Adam had kept this covenant, his descendants would have continued to enjoy this covenant. Each individual and family would have had this same relationship to the land and the animals. There is no indication here of a future government structure that mediated between individual humans and God in this covenant. The right of humans to own and direct property under God is part and parcel with their status as creatures in God’s image and with the creation covenant.

### **Commands regarding killing and stealing**

Reformed ethics include all human moral duty under the Ten Commandments. Rightly interpreted these commandments include all sins and all duties. The rules for interpretation found in the WLC 99 are quite broad; the commandments are both positive and negative, and include all aspects of thinking and acting; they certainly include one’s concept of property.

The Sixth Commandment, “You shall not murder,” requires “all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life and the life of others.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus taught that this commandment reaches the heart, and requires one not to hate or belittle his neighbor (Matt 5:21-26). Political or economic systems, such as Communism or Nazism, which do not recognize the individual as a creature of God have broken this commandment horribly, inspiring in the people the idea that individuals are to be hated or disregarded because of their class or opinions. An excellent illustration of this disregard for individuals is found in the attitude of Vladimir Lenin. In 1918 he demanded the purge of those “counterrevolutionaries and other persons” opposing or hindering the new communism, calling them “insects” and “parasites.”<sup>14</sup> The communistic economic and political system Lenin built was eventually to be responsible for the death of millions of people. These victims of communism were not guilty of any crime deserving death. The implementation of enforced collectivism required the breaking of the Sixth Commandment.

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<sup>13</sup> WSC 68; cf. WLC 135.

<sup>14</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*; trans. by Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 1:27. Solzhenitsyn references Lenin, *Collected Works* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.), 25:68, 203-204.

Likewise, the Eighth Commandment implies a free enterprise, capitalistic economic system. The command, “You shall not steal,” clearly implies private ownership of property. The biblical terms for “steal” (Hebrew *ganav* and Greek *klepto*) are defined as taking what belongs to another without his agreement or permission. The only exceptions to this commandment would be in cases of war or for punishment for crime.

Scriptural law forbids all kinds of stealing, including real property, animals, or other movable property. Thieves were to make full restitution, with additional amounts added depending on the nature of the theft. The Bible also commands honest weights and measures, prompt payment of obligations, and all reasonable efforts to protect the property of others. Scripture commends hard work, earning money, saving and investing, and generosity. At the same time, it condemns the love of money.<sup>15</sup>

The Westminster catechisms state that this commandment requires “the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.”<sup>16</sup> This procuring is to be done in a “lawful” and “just” manner. The book of Proverbs is an example of the Bible’s attitude toward private enterprise, encouraging people to work in a capitalistic system; the Westminster divines cited several passages in Proverbs to support their understanding of the Eighth Commandment.<sup>17</sup>

They likewise cited Eph 4:28, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.” This command of Paul requires a free enterprise system. After providing “useful” labor, producing “with his hands” something that others are willing to pay for, the former thief receives his payment. He then is to “have,” that is, to possess this money. He then saves enough money so that, in addition to meeting his own and his family’s expenses, he has sufficient to “give” to those who are in need. There is no provision here for the government to step in.

### **Duties of the Civil Magistrate**

In the socialist or communist system the government must play a huge role. The only exception would be a small, voluntary community, but even such communities must have a central authority that regulates the internal economy. When an entire country is involved, this government entity is the state, personified as the civil magistrate. Only the civil magistrate possesses the power of the state, necessary to extract property from reluctant citizens in order to distribute it to others.

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<sup>15</sup> Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13-14 (same statement on a different occasion); 1 Tim 3:3; 6:10; 2 Tim 3:2; Heb 13:5; 1 Pet 5:2.

<sup>16</sup> WLC 141; WSC 74.

<sup>17</sup> Prov 6:1-6; 10:4; 11:15; 21:17, 20; 23:20-21; 27:23-27; 28:19. The importance of one’s “vocation” as not only a means of support, but as God’s calling and the means of glorifying him in life, is an important emphasis of Reformed theology. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3:10.

The Westminster Assembly discussed at great length the duties of the civil magistrate, and devoted an entire chapter of the Confession to it.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the entire chapter in the Confession there is no statement that the magistrate should take and distribute property in some socialistic or communistic manner. Rather, it is his duty to “defend and encourage” them that “are good,” and to provide “punishment of evil doers.”<sup>19</sup> The magistrate is empowered by God to enforce the outward observance of God’s commands, codified in “the wholesome laws of each commonwealth.”<sup>20</sup> These laws of God include private ownership of property, as the Eighth Commandment stipulates.

While the Westminster Confession at this point does not specify “the widow and the orphan,” its approach is the same as that found in the earlier Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, which includes as a duty of the “Magistracy” the following: “Let him protect widows, fatherless children, and those that be afflicted, against wrong.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than stating he must support these unfortunate people, it limits his actions to defending them against unjust actions from others. Charity here is to come from individuals and the church, not from the state. The Westminster divines doubtless shared this opinion.

The Westminster divines were familiar with the Belgic Confession of 1561, the earliest of the common Reformed confessions. In its statement on “The Magistrates” it makes the following declaration:

We detest the error of the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates, and would subvert justice, introduce a community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God hath established among men.”<sup>22</sup>

Note that the communist goal of “a community of goods” is explicitly denied, as an “error” to be “detested.” The Belgic Confession associates this communistic system with a denial of the proper authority of the civil magistrate. They probably had in mind the disaster at Münster that took place fewer than thirty years before. While the Westminster divines did not explicitly mention communism at this point (they did in another connection), it is obvious that they agreed with the Belgic Confession in this matter, as their description of the duties of the civil magistrate agreed with that in the earlier confession.

### **Communion of the Saints**

The only specific mention of communism in the Westminster Standards is found in the Confession’s chapter 26, “Of the Communion of Saints.” The Confession praises the communion that believers enjoy with God and with one another as one body in Christ. The final section of the chapter, however, lists two abuses of this doctrine. The first abuse is to think that

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<sup>18</sup> WCF 23.

<sup>19</sup> WCF 23:1.

<sup>20</sup> WCF 23:2.

<sup>21</sup> SHC30:3.

<sup>22</sup> BC 36.

believers share in the divinity of God or of Christ. The second abuse is to think that the believers own their property in common:

Nor doth their (the saints') communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or property which each man hath in his goods and possessions.<sup>23</sup>

The divines cited three passages from Scripture to confirm this point (Exod 20:15; Eph 4:28; and Acts 5:4). These passages deal with the command not to steal and with the ownership of property, confirming the fact that the divines held capitalism to be the biblical economic system.

Unlike the Belgic Confession, which rejected communism under the heading of the duties of the government, the Westminster Confession goes a step further, placing this rejection under the heading of the communion of the saints. One may conclude, reading the Belgic Confession, that state-sponsored communism is evil, yet that communism might be acceptable in a private voluntary association. However, by placing this rejection under the topic of the communion of the saints, the Westminster divines asserted in addition that communism is wrong even in concept, even in a totally Christian context. They thus rejected even non-governmental communistic associations.

## **Conclusion**

The idea that the Bible teaches no political economic or political system had no place at the Westminster Assembly. The idea that the government is to fulfill a "progressive" role in the economy by redistributing wealth was even more abhorrent to the Westminster divines. Throughout the Standards, at the appropriate places, the Westminster divines made it clear that the Bible supports the private ownership and management of property, and the attaining of wealth (an "outward estate") as an obligation under God. This was to be done in a "lawful" manner that also contributed to the wealth of others. Only the free enterprise system provides the freedom and legal structure to enable people to carry out these commands of God. There is a biblical system indeed, the capitalistic free-enterprise system; and the Westminster Standards concur in that judgment.

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<sup>23</sup> WCF 26:3.