

Lesson Thirty-One

An Experiment In Communism

LESSON IDEA

To expose communism as the age-old failure it is by recounting the hardships it brought to the Pilgrims — a community of Christians who tried to “share all things in common.”

PREPARATION

Review Lesson 7 (communal living in the Jamestown settlement). And collect some example of life under communism in such countries as Cuba, China, and the former Soviet Union.

OUR STORY BEGINS nearly four centuries ago along the banks of the Witham River in Scrooby, England. Here, in 1606, members of a small church were denied the right to worship according to their beliefs. Indeed, many were jailed for daring to establish a church that espoused doctrines contrary to the official Church of England. By the autumn of 1607 the persecution had become so intolerable that they decided to flee to Holland. But the King, determined to stop such emigration, ordered the ports closed to all who did not have a license to leave England.

One member of the persecuted congregation, William Bradford, was a youth of 17 at the time. He was learned, well read, and fluent in numerous languages. In addition to Dutch and French, a friend would later write, “The Latin and Greek he also mastered. But the Hebrew he most of all studied, because, as he said, he would see with his own eyes the ancient oracles of God in their native beauty.”

In a letter to his parents, apologizing for disobeying their wishes (they supported the official church), he stated:

Wherefore, since it is for a good Cause that I am likely to suffer the disasters which you lay before me, you have no cause to be either angry with me or sorry for me. Yes, I am not only willing to part with everything that is dear to me in this world for this Cause, but I am also Thankful that God hath given me a heart so to do, and will accept me so to suffer

for Him.

And suffer these earnest Christians certainly did. The captain they hired betrayed them to British authorities, and all were seized before their ship reached the ocean. They were persecuted, and many were jailed, but despite such obstacles most managed to reach Holland within a year.

The new arrivals found the adjustment to life in a foreign country quite difficult. Jobs were scarce, housing was poor, and the future at times looked bleak indeed. They had religious freedom, but little else.

After ten years in Holland, these Christians, whom we know as the Pilgrims, decided to hazard the long and dangerous voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to settle in America. Pooling resources and borrowing what money they could, they chartered two vessels and, in July 1620, set off for the New World.

At first, fortune seemed to frown on the voyage. There were quarrels with other passengers, conflicts with the captains, and squabbles among themselves. Within hours of leaving the English coast, the captain of the first vessel (the *Speedwell*) insisted his craft was leaking so badly that it was not seaworthy. He returned to port. Soon the second ship followed. Can you give the name of the second ship? Yes, it was the *Mayflower*.

Following a few repairs, the *Speedwell* was deemed seaworthy, but its captain remained doubtful that it was. After additional delays, the Pilgrims decided to crowd together aboard the *Mayflower* and make the voyage in just that ship alone. Before leaving England for the last time, however, these courageous Christians drew up an agreement (not the Mayflower Compact) declaring how lands, goods, and produce would be divided once they reached the New World. Here are some of the terms of that contract:

The persons transported ... shall continue their joint stock and partnership together the

space of seven years . . . during which time all profits and benefits that are got by trade, traffic, trucking, working, fishing, or any other means of any person or persons remain still in the common stock until the division.

That all such persons as are of this colony are to have their meat, drink, apparel, and other provisions out of the common stock and goods of the said colony.

What would we call such a living arrangement today? [Explain the communist theory, "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."] What is different about the communism that the Pilgrims intended to practice in their new homeland and the communism practiced in Cuba, China, North Korea, and Vietnam today? [There are two important differences. Today's communists are not Christians steeped in respect for each other as children of a Divine Creator and willing to share equally, as were the Pilgrims, nor is modern communism voluntary. Most people living under Red tyranny during our modern age have had little choice in the matter. They have been forced to accept the system by brute force and terror, whereas the Pilgrims willingly chose their temporary system of communal living, perhaps due to a combination of ignorance and well-intentioned idealism.]

The 102 settlers who crowded aboard the *Mayflower* soon discovered the hardships and realities of ocean travel. By the time they arrived in America, many were already ill and weak. In addition, heavy storms in the Atlantic had blown them miles off course. Instead of landing in Virginia, where they hoped to join the settlers in Jamestown, they arrived several hundred miles north. Who remembers where they finally came ashore? Yes, it was in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Does anyone recall the date?

THE YEAR WAS 1620, and the day was December 21st — four days before Christmas. The loneliness, the anguish, the hardships, the near starvation, the sickness, and the deaths that plagued the Pilgrim band during that first winter can scarcely be imagined today. In less than four months, nearly one-half of the colonists had died. William Bradford, whose wife died just two weeks before the Plymouth

landing, tells us that "in the time of most distress, there was but six or seven sound persons, who, to their great commendations be it spoken, spared no pains, night nor day, but with abundance of toil and hazard of their own health fetched them wood, made them fires, dressed their meat, made their beds, washed their loathsome clothes." These men and women were not faint hearted, but rather a determined and devoted lot. Surely they could "share all things in common," with a selfless spirit, if any group could.

With spring came hope — and unexpected friends. The only Indians the Pilgrims had encountered during the first few months had fled. Then, in late March, one came to meet them — and greeted them in English! His name was Samoset, a member of the Sagamore tribe. He had learned, he explained, a few words of the "white man's language" from another Indian, Squanto, who had traveled with sailors. Samoset arranged for his chief, Massasoit, to visit the colonists.

From this meeting came an agreement between the Indians and the Pilgrims, each pledging that neither would harm the other, or steal their food or possessions. Both promised to support each other should help be needed. And the Indians provided immediate assistance to the Pilgrims by teaching them how to fish in the strange waters, how to plant corn, and how to hunt game (especially the elusive wild turkey).

With this invaluable help, the future began to brighten, and when the *Mayflower* set sail for England in the spring, not a single Pilgrim returned with it. All stayed, despite the hardships, and began to live according to the agreement they had made at the start of their journey. Everyone was to work in fields and forests to harvest food, not for themselves or their own families, but for the common storehouse and the good of all. But as the summer wore on, quarrels became frequent and work a drudgery. As Bradford, now gov-

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Bradford's *History Of Plymouth Plantation*, which should be available in most public libraries, is an absorbing and inspiring account of Pilgrim life at Plymouth. Few current history texts emphasize the failure of the communal system, or relate events surrounding it accurately. Bradford's history is a reliable, first-hand source.

ernor of the colony, later recalled, “For the young men that were most able and fit for labor and service did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men’s wives and children, without any recompense.”

THE HARVEST, such as it was, was placed in the common storehouse. Each family took what it needed — or rather, what it thought was needed. By mid-winter the food was nearly gone, with everyone on half rations. In November, a few supplies arrived from England, but these were also quickly depleted. Disease and hunger once again stalked the settlement and death was a common occurrence.

What had gone wrong? Governor Bradford summed it up:

The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years, and that among godly and sober men, may well evince [show] the vanity of that conceit of

Plato and other ancients. . . that the taking away of property, and bringing in community into a common wealth, 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.

What had the Pilgrims ignored about human nature in their communal system of “sharing all things equally”? [Ask for opinions. Make the point that even the most dedicated and devoted Christians are still imperfect human beings, prone to ethical lapses when confronted by extreme hardship and stress. Jealousy, laziness, selfishness, and other ethical foibles are aspects of human nature that biblically-based morality can help alleviate, but seldom if ever completely eliminate.]



The free market alternative proved to be of great benefit to the Pilgrims. By the next fall they had more food than their homes and storehouse could hold. To show their gratitude to God for the wisdom He had given their leaders, and for the bounty of their harvest, they set aside a special day of thanksgiving. A grand feast was prepared and their Indian friends were invited. The day began with church services, after which the Pilgrims and their guests dined at tables laden with turkey, deer, duck, geese, fish, and clams; with beans, squash, pumpkins, plums, grapes, nuts, and cranberries; and with corn, bread, and cakes.



PILGRIM LIFE: Some of the possessions of Samuel Fuller, William Brewster, and Edward Winslow — leaders, along with William Bradford — of the early colony, in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

FACED WITH another monumental economic debacle during the second winter, Governor Bradford decided to try a bold and ambitious experiment: make each family responsible for its own food, clothing, and shelter. As described in his own words:

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.... And so assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number ...

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 women now went willingly into the field, and took their tittle ones with them to set corn (which before would allege weakness and inability.)

Do you think the Pilgrims were wise to abandon

collectivism in favor of a free market? Why? Do you think each family prospered more or less when made responsible for its own welfare? Would such a system be more productive today than government welfare programs? [Allow time for discussion and opinions. Note that “A heavy progressive or graduated income tax,” such as that which we now have in the United States, was a key plank of Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* for transforming a free-market economy into a collectivist one. Explain the way in which such a tax works to redistribute wealth “from each according to his abilities” to “each according to his needs” — one of the major flaws of the Pilgrims’ collectivist experiment.]

Each year after the harvest season we still celebrate that first Thanksgiving Day, also featuring lavish dinners with family and friends. The most essential ingredients original celebration, however, were individual responsibility, private ownership of property, and a fervent belief in God.

Concluding Thought

“Sharing all things in common,” or communism, is an age-old failure even when practiced voluntarily by like-minded people with strong Christian moral convictions. This was learned the hard way by the Pilgrims, who promptly mended their ways. Can we learn from their experience, or must we repeat their error today?

Looking Ahead

Next week, we will depart from our usual format by asking questions about the lessons to date. So don’t forget to bring your thinking caps!

DURING THE WEEK

Use each day’s dinner hour to discuss why communism — past and present — fails to produce adequate food, clothing, and shelter for those who live under it. Recall the failure of the common storehouse and communal system at Jamestown, the first permanent colony in America and a parallel to the experience of the Pilgrims. *Workers’ Paradise Lost*, by Eugene Lyons, is a revealing account of the total failure of communism in the former Soviet Union. Have a member of the family borrow the book (which is currently out-of-print) from a library, or locate a copy in a used bookstore, to be read by all.