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WAS JESUS A SOCIALIST?

Lawrence W. Reed

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ANNE RATHBONE BRADLEY, PhD

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WAS JESUS A SOCIALIST?

Lawrence W. Reed

Editor's Note: *The original version of this essay appeared on FEE.org in January 2015 as part of the Clichés of Progressivism series, a collaborative venture between the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) and Young America's Foundation. As an organization, FEE is unaffiliated with any particular faith. The author wishes readers to understand that his personal perspective expressed here is not intended to proselytize for any particular faith or church but to illuminate his interpretation of the moral and economic dimension of Jesus.*

On June 16, 1992, London's *Daily Telegraph* reported this astonishingly bold remark by former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev: "Jesus was the first socialist, the first to seek a better life for mankind."¹

Perhaps we should cut Gorbachev some slack here. A man who climbed his way to the top of a stridently atheist empire with a sorry track record on human rights was probably not a Bible scholar. But surely he knew that if socialism is nothing more than the seeking of "a better life for mankind," then Jesus could hardly have been its first advocate; he would, in fact, be just one of several billion of them.

You don't have to be a Christian to appreciate the errors in the Gorbachev canard. You can be a person of any faith or no faith at all. You just have to appreciate facts, history, and logic. You can even be a socialist—but one with open eyes—and realize that Jesus wasn't in your camp.

Let's first define the term socialism, which the Gorbachev comment only obfuscates. Socialism isn't happy thoughts, nebulous fantasies, mere good intentions, or children sharing their Halloween candy with one another. In a modern political, economic, and social context, socialism isn't voluntary like the Girl Scouts. Its central characteristic is the concentration of power to forcibly achieve one or more (or usually all) of these purposes: central planning of the economy, government ownership of

1. *London Daily Telegraph*, June 16, 1992.

property, and the redistribution of wealth. No amount of “we do it all for you” or “it’s for your own good” or “we’re helping people” rhetoric can erase that. What makes socialism socialism is the fact that you can’t opt out, a point eloquently made here by David Boaz of the Cato Institute:

One difference between libertarianism [a personal choice and liberty-based system] and socialism is that a socialist society can’t tolerate groups of people practicing freedom, but a libertarian society can comfortably allow people to choose voluntary socialism. If a group of people—even a very large group—wanted to purchase land and own it in common, they would be free to do so. The libertarian legal order would require only that no one be coerced into joining or giving up his property.²

Government, whether big or small, is the only entity in society that possesses a legal monopoly over the use of force. The more force it initiates against people, the more it subordinates the choices of the ruled to the whims of their rulers—that is, the more socialist it becomes. A reader may object to this description by insisting that to “socialize” something is to simply “share” it and “help people” in the process, but that’s baby talk. It’s how you do it that defines the system. Do it through the use of force, and it’s socialism. Do it through persuasion, free will, and respect for property rights, and it’s something else entirely.

So was Jesus really a socialist? More to the main focus of this essay, did he call for the state to redistribute income to either punish the rich or to help the poor?

I first heard “Jesus was a socialist” and “Jesus was a redistributionist” some forty years ago. I was puzzled. I had always understood Jesus’s message to be that the most important decision a person would make in his earthly lifetime was to accept or reject him as savior. That decision was clearly to be a very personal one—an individual and voluntary choice. He

2. David Boaz, “The Coming Libertarian Age,” *Cato Policy Report* (Jan.–Feb. 1997).

constantly stressed inner, spiritual renewal as far more critical to well-being than material things. I wondered, “How could the same Jesus advocate the use of force to take stuff from some and give it to others?” I just couldn’t imagine him supporting a fine or a jail sentence for people who don’t want to fork over their money for food-stamp programs.

“Wait a minute!” you say. “Didn’t Jesus answer, Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s when the Pharisees tried to trick him into denouncing a Roman-imposed tax?” Yes indeed, he did say that. It’s found first in the Gospel of Matthew, 22:15–22, and later in the Gospel of Mark, 12:13–17. But notice that everything depends on just what truly did belong to Caesar and what didn’t, which is actually a rather powerful endorsement of property rights. Jesus said nothing like “It belongs to Caesar if Caesar simply says it does, no matter how much he wants, how he gets it, or how he chooses to spend it.”

The fact is, one can scour the Scriptures with a fine-tooth comb and find nary a word from Jesus that endorses the forcible redistribution of wealth by political authorities. None, period.

“But didn’t Jesus say he came to uphold the law?” you ask. Yes, in Matthew 5:17–20 he declares, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”³ In Luke 24:44, he clarifies this when he says, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” He was not saying, “Whatever laws the government passes, I’m all for.” He was speaking specifically of the Mosaic law (primarily the Ten Commandments) and the prophecies of his own coming.

Consider the eighth of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not steal.” Note the period after the word “steal.” This admonition does not read, “You shall not steal unless the other guy has more than you do” or “You shall not steal unless you’re absolutely positive you can spend it better than the guy who earned it.” Nor does it say, “You shall not steal, but it’s OK to hire someone else,

3. All Bible citations are from the New International Version (NIV).

like a politician, to do it for you.”

In case people were still tempted to steal, the tenth commandment is aimed at nipping in the bud one of the principal motives for stealing (and for redistribution): “You shall not covet.” In other words, if it’s not yours, keep your fingers off of it.

In Luke 12:13–15, Jesus is confronted with a redistribution request. A man with a grievance approaches him and demands, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

“

Jesus never called for equality of material wealth, let alone the use of political force to accomplish it, even in situations of dire need.

Jesus replies thusly: “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you? Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (emphasis added). Wow! He could have equalized the wealth between two men with a wave of his hand, but he chose to denounce envy instead.

“What about the story of the Good Samaritan? Doesn’t that make a case for government welfare programs or redistribution?” you inquire. The answer is an emphatic “No!” Consider the details of the story, as recorded in Luke 10:29–37: A traveler comes upon a man at the side of a road. The man had been beaten and robbed and left half-dead. What did the traveler do? He helped the man himself, on the spot, with his own resources. He did not say, “Write a letter to the emperor” or “Go see your social worker” and walk on. If he had done that, he would more likely be known today as the “Good-*for-nothing* Samaritan”—if he were remembered at all.

The Good Samaritan story makes a case for helping a needy person voluntarily out of love and compassion. There’s no suggestion that the Samaritan “owed” anything to the man in need or that it was the duty of a distant politician to help out with other people’s money.

Moreover, Jesus never called for equality of material wealth,

let alone the use of political force to accomplish it, even in situations of dire need. In his book, *Biblical Economics*, theologian R. C. Sproul Jr. notes that Jesus “wants the poor to be helped” but not at gunpoint, which is essentially what government force is all about:

I am convinced that political and economic policies involving the forced redistribution of wealth via government intervention are neither right nor safe. Such policies are both unethical and ineffective.... On the surface it would seem that socialists are on God’s side. Unfortunately, their programs and their means foster greater poverty even though their hearts remain loyal to eliminating poverty. The tragic fallacy that invades socialist thinking is that there is a necessary, causal connection between the wealth of the wealthy and the poverty of the poor. Socialists assume that one man’s wealth is based on another man’s poverty; therefore, to stop poverty and help the poor man, we must have socialism.⁴

To Sproul’s comment I would add this addendum: sometimes a person becomes wealthy wholly or in part because of his political connections. He secures special favors or subsidies from government, or uses government to disable his competitors. No consistently logical thinker who favors liberty and property rights, whether he’s Christian or not, supports such practices. They are forms of theft, and their source is political power—the very debilitating thing that progressives and socialists advocate more of.

Legitimate wealth is derived voluntarily. It comes from the creation of value and mutually beneficial, voluntary exchange. It does not spring from political power that redistributes in reverse, taking from the poor and giving to the rich. Economic entrepreneurs are a boon to society; political entrepreneurs are another animal entirely. We all benefit when a Steve Jobs invents

4. R. C. Sproul, Jr., *Biblical Economics: A Commonsense Guide to Our Daily Bread* (Bristol, TN: Draught Horse Press, 2002), p. 138.

an iPhone; but when the Cowboy Poetry Festival in Nevada gets a federal grant because of Senator Harry Reid, or when Goldman Sachs gets a taxpayer bailout, millions get hurt and must pay for it.

Socialists and their progressive brethren are fond of citing the occasion (found in Matthew 21:12–13) of Jesus driving the “moneychangers” from the Temple in Jerusalem. Out of context, it would appear he didn’t approve of capitalist buying and selling. But note the location where this incident occurred. It was in the holiest of places, a place of worship. It was God’s house. Those who were using it for a totally different purpose were defiling it. Jesus’s admonition was not to stop buying and selling—which would flout many other things he said elsewhere in the scriptures. It was to stop doing these things in a house of prayer, where they were out of character and inappropriate. He never drove a “moneychanger” from a marketplace or from a bank. No one should go to a funeral with an accordion and strike up a rendition of “Happy Days Are Here Again.” Likewise, no one should abuse the purpose or the occasion of worship in God’s house either.

What about the reference in the book of Acts to the early Christians selling their worldly goods and sharing communally in the proceeds? That sounds like a progressive utopia. On closer inspection, however, it turns out that those early Christians did not sell everything they had and were not commanded or expected to do so. They continued to meet in their own private homes, for example. In his contributing chapter to the 2014 book *For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty*, Art Lindsley of the Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics writes,

Again, in this passage from Acts, there is no mention of the state at all. These early believers contributed their goods freely, without coercion, voluntarily. Elsewhere in Scripture we see that Christians are even instructed to give in just this manner, freely, for “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). There is plenty of indication that private property rights were still in effect.⁵

5. Anne Bradley and Art Lindsley, eds., *For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty*.

It may disappoint progressives to learn that Jesus's words and deeds repeatedly upheld such critically important, capitalist virtues as contract, profit, and private property. For example, consider his parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30). Of several men in the story, the one who takes his money and buries it is reprimanded while the one who invests and generates the largest return is applauded and rewarded.

Though not central to the story, good lessons in supply and demand, as well as the sanctity of contract, are apparent in Jesus's parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16). A landowner offers a wage to attract workers for a day of urgent work picking grapes. Near the end of the day, he realizes he has to quickly hire more and to get them, he offers for an hour of work what he previously had offered to pay the first workers for the whole day. When one of those who worked all day complained, the landowner answered, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

The well-known "Golden Rule" comes from the lips of Jesus himself, in Matthew 7:12. "So in everything, *do to others what you would have them do to you*, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." In Matthew 19:19, Jesus says, "love your neighbor as yourself." Nowhere does he even remotely suggest that we should dislike a neighbor because of his wealth or seek to take that wealth from him. If you don't want your property confiscated (and most people don't), then clearly you're not supposed to confiscate somebody else's.

Christian doctrine cautions against greed. So does present-day economist Thomas Sowell: "I have never understood why it is 'greed' to want to keep the money you have earned but *not* greed to want to take somebody else's money." Using the power of government to grab another person's property isn't exactly altruistic. Jesus never even implied that accumulating wealth through peaceful commerce was in any way wrong; he simply

implored people to not allow wealth to rule them or corrupt their character. That's why his greatest apostle, Paul, didn't say money was evil in the famous reference in 1 Timothy 6:10. Here's what Paul actually said: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (emphasis added). Indeed, progressives themselves have not selflessly abandoned money, for it is other people's money, especially that of "the rich," that they're always clamoring for.

In Matthew 19:23, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven." A redistributionist might say, "Eureka! There it is! He doesn't like rich people" and then stretch the remark beyond recognition to justify one rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul scheme after another. But this admonition is entirely consistent with everything else Jesus says. It's not a call to envy the rich, to take from the rich, or to give "free" cell phones to the poor. It's a call to character. It's an observation that some people let their wealth rule them, rather than the other way around. It's a warning about temptations (which come in many forms, not just material wealth). Haven't we all noticed that among the rich, as is equally true among the poor, you have both good and bad people? Haven't we all seen some rich celebrities corrupted by their fame and fortune, while others among the rich live perfectly upstanding lives? Haven't we all seen some poor people who allow their poverty to demoralize and enervate them, while others among the poor view it as an incentive to improve themselves and their communities?

When the first version of this essay appeared in January 2015, several "progressive" friends raised Romans 13:1-7 as evidence contrary to my thesis. (Similar sentiments are expressed in 1 Peter 2:13-20 and Titus 3:1-3.) In the Romans 13 passage, the apostle Paul urges submission to the governing authorities and warns against rebellion. He also says if you owe taxes, pay your taxes. So a socialist or "progressive" of today might say this blesses all sorts of things including redistribution, a welfare state, or whatever the state wants to do either for you or to you. This is quite a leap.

Here, as in all other parts of the Bible, context is important. Paul was speaking to early Christians in an environment seething with anti-Roman feeling. He undoubtedly did not want the growth of Christianity to be sidetracked by violence or other provocations against the Romans that would be brutally repressed. He was attempting to set the people's sights on what he regarded as higher things of greater immediate importance.

But it's a larger error to extrapolate what Paul said to justify one particular view of the role of government, namely a "progressive" or "socialist" one. Suppose the "governing authorities" run a minimal state with Constitutional strictures and guarantees of personal liberties and private property. Suppose, furthermore, that the rules of that arrangement clearly advise the governed, "We protect you from aggressions against your rights and property but we don't otherwise give you free stuff. You're entitled to your liberties; to engage in private, voluntary charity and commerce, to deal with each other peacefully; to live as you choose so long as you each do no harm to another. But we in government will not rob Peter to pay Paul." There is nothing in Romans 13:1-7 that says these "governing authorities" are owed any less respect than if they were welfare-state redistributionists.

So clearly, the verses of Romans 13:1-7 assert the legitimacy of government per se but do not ordain what today's "progressives" and socialists demand. The Bible, in fact, is full of stories about people who bravely and righteously resisted the overreach of governments. Does anyone really believe that if Jesus had been preaching just before the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, he would have declared, "Pharaoh demands that you stay, so unpack those bags and get back to work?"

Norman Horn, founder of LibertarianChristians.com, notes that both the Old and New Testaments provide numerous instances of laudatory disobedience to the state:

Hebrews defying Pharaoh's decrees to murder their infants (Exodus 1); Rahab lying to the King of Jericho about the Hebrew spies (Joshua 2); Ehud deceiving the king's ministers

and assassinating the king (Judges 3); Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refusing to comply with the king's decrees, and miraculously saved twice for doing so (Daniel 3 and 6); the Magi from the East disobeying Herod's direct orders (Matthew 2); and Peter and John choosing to obey God rather than men (Acts 5).⁶

At the risk of belaboring the point, I share these insightful comments from a conversation with my colleague Jeffrey Tucker of the Foundation for Economic Education:

Mary, Jesus, and Joseph fled Bethlehem rather than submit to Herod's order to kill all infants. If Romans 13 meant that everyone must submit always, Jesus would have been murdered in the weeks after his birth.... Resistance, of course, can be moral. Christianity has inspired resistance to the state throughout history and in modern times, from the American Revolution to the civil rights protests to the Polish resistance against communism. Jesus set the example: he avoided government when he could, resisted in prudent ways when possible, and ultimately complied when he had to.

The empirical evidence today is overwhelming that, as Montesquieu observed two centuries ago, "Countries are well cultivated, not as they are fertile, but as they are free."⁷ Nations possessing the most economic freedom (and the smallest governments) have higher rates of long-term economic growth and are more prosperous than those that engage in socialistic and redistributive practices. The countries with the lowest levels of economic freedom also have the lowest standards of living. Free countries and their people are the greatest charitable givers, whereas on net balance, socialist ones are decisively on the receiving end. Why is this relevant? Because you can't redistribute anything to anybody if it's not created by somebody

6. Norman Horn, "New Testament Theology of the State, Part 2," LibertarianChristians.com, Nov. 28, 2008, <http://bit.ly/1ILrguc>

7. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748).

in the first place, and the evidence strongly suggests that the only lasting thing that socialist and redistributive arrangements do for poor people is give them lots of company.

In Jesus's teachings and in many other parts of the New Testament, Christians—indeed, all people—are advised to be of “generous spirit,” to care for one's family, to help the poor, to assist widows and orphans, to exhibit kindness and to maintain the highest character. How all that gets translated into the dirty business of coercive, vote-buying, politically driven redistribution

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schemes is a problem for prevaricators with agendas. It's not a problem for scholars of what the Bible actually says and doesn't say.

Search your conscience. Consider the evidence. Be mindful of facts. Ask yourself: When it comes to helping the poor, would Jesus prefer that you give your money freely to the Salvation Army or at

gunpoint to the welfare department?

Jesus was no dummy. He was not interested in the public professions of charitableness in which the legalistic and hypocritical Pharisees were fond of engaging. He dismissed their self-serving, cheap talk. He knew it was often insincere, rarely indicative of how they conducted their personal affairs, and always a dead end with plenty of snares and delusions along the way. It would hardly make sense for him to champion the poor by supporting policies that undermine the process of wealth creation necessary to help them. In the final analysis, he would never endorse a scheme that doesn't work and is rooted in envy or theft. In spite of the attempts of many modern-day progressives to make him into a welfare-state redistributionist, Jesus was nothing of the sort.

Lawrence W. Reed



Lawrence W. (“Larry”) Reed became president of FEE in 2008, after serving as chairman of its board of trustees in the 1990s and both writing and speaking for FEE since the late 1970s. Prior to becoming FEE’s president, he served for twenty years as president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, Michigan. He also taught economics full-time from 1977 to 1984 at Northwood University in Michigan and chaired its Department of Economics from 1982 to 1984.

He holds a B.A. degree in economics from Grove City College (1975) and an M.A. degree in history from Slippery Rock State University (1978), both in Pennsylvania. He holds two honorary doctorates, one from Central Michigan University (public administration—1993) and Northwood University (laws—2008).

A champion for liberty, Reed has authored over 1,000 newspaper columns and articles, dozens of articles in magazines and journals in the United States and abroad. His writings have

appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *USA Today*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Detroit News*, and *Detroit Free Press*, among many others. He has authored or co-authored seven books, including *A Republic—If We Can Keep It*, *Striking the Root: Essays on Liberty*, *The Great Hope*, and *Are We Good Enough For Liberty?* He is frequently interviewed on radio talk shows and has appeared as a guest on numerous television programs, including those anchored by Judge Andrew Napolitano and John Stossel on Fox Business News.

Reed has delivered at least 75 speeches annually in the past 30 years—in virtually every state and dozens of countries from Bulgaria to China to Bolivia. His best-known lectures include “Seven Principles of Sound Policy” and “Great Myths of the Great Depression”—both of which have been translated into more than a dozen languages and distributed worldwide.

His interests in political and economic affairs have taken him as a freelance journalist to 81 countries on 6 continents. He is a member of the prestigious Mont Pelerin Society and an advisor to numerous organizations around the world. He served for 15 years as a member of the board (and one term as president) of the State Policy Network. His numerous recognitions include the “Champion of Freedom” award from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy and the “Distinguished Alumni” award from Grove City College.

He is a native of Pennsylvania and a 30-year resident of Michigan, and now resides in Newnan, Georgia.

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