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The Heart of Socialism

A Sympathetic Response to Advocates of Social Programs

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-heart-of-socialism>

by Phillip Holmes

Socialism is trending in the minds of many Americans. Some love it, some hate it, and others are indifferent to it. Some Christians argue that it's evil, while others argue that it's morally good or neutral. Those that argue for its wickedness often fail to condemn the crony capitalism and corporate welfare that is widespread in the United States; therefore, their arguments often fall on deaf ears with socialist sympathizers. The arguments for its moral good or neutrality typically appeal to emotion, rather than evidence, which is considered insufficient for those that oppose it.

Particular faces may come to mind when we think of socialism in this election cycle, but the reality is that forms of socialism have been a part of the fabric of America since the public school system (late 1800s) and FDR's New Deal (1933–1938). Martin Luther King rightfully critiques the state of the country during his life when he said, "This country has socialism for the rich, rugged individualism for the poor."

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Furthermore, socialism is extremely difficult to pin down and most will agree that there are varying degrees of socialism. You'd be hard pressed to find a consensus on the Internet of what components embody a socialist government. But for my purposes here, I will use the **definition** by John Piper:

A social and economic system that through legal or governmental or military coercion — in other words, you go to jail if you don't do this — establishes social ownership at the expense of private or personal ownership and/or you could say where coercion is used to establish social control — if not ownership, at least control of the means of production in society. And thus, through control, you effectively eliminate many of the implications and motivations of private ownership.

In other words, Socialism borrows the compassionate aims of Christianity in meeting people's needs while rejecting the Christian expectation that this compassion not be coerced or forced. Socialism, therefore, gets its attractiveness at certain points in history where people are drawn to the entitlements that Socialism brings, and where people are ignorant or forgetful of the coercion and the force required to implement it — and whether or not that coercion might, in fact, backfire and result in greater poverty or drab uniformity or, worse, the abuse of the coercion as we saw in the murderous states like USSR and Cambodia.

Few question whether those who advocate for socialistic forms of government have good intentions. They clearly seem to care about the poor. Some, like Senator Sanders, want to fight much of the corruption that is currently in Washington. But as the saying goes, "The road to hell

is paved with good intentions” (though, no, I’m not here condemning anyone to hell). In other words, the good intentions of “social programs” (a term I will continue to use below) will have unexpected bad consequences in the long run.

I Was Something Like a Socialist

If you had asked me in college what I thought about socialism, I would have said it was an attractive idea. While I was mostly indifferent to politics, I considered myself conservative on issues like abortion but liberal on issues such as government assistance or social programs. I was what some would call a moderate. I had no problem with a system that called for the government to give money to the needy and less fortunate. But my understanding of economics, politics, the human heart, and the consequences of ideas was extremely limited. I was chasing a kind of utopia — a heaven on earth.

Growing up in one of the poorest counties in the poorest state of the republic, most of the people I knew received some type of government assistance. For some families, it was a crutch. But for others, it was a stepping-stone, and the assistance was temporary. The biggest difference I noticed between the two groups was that the latter possessed Christian values of hard work and familial support, while the former simply didn’t. Because of this, the former’s cycle of poverty continued, while the latter ended theirs within one or two generations.

My family was one of the households that received government assistance. I’ll give you a peek into my background. My grandmother helped raise me and along with my mother and aunts, instilled a lot of good values in my cousins and me at an early age. Though my grandmother only received an eighth-grade education and grew up in complete poverty, by the grace of God, she is the reason the poverty cycle was eliminated in one generation. She not only taught us the value of hard work, but she modeled it.

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Every morning she woke up before dawn, exercised, labored in her garden in the Mississippi sun, read her Bible, and prayed. But her work wasn’t done. I never missed a meal, the house was always spotless, and the lawn was always well kept. She put two children through college (my mom is one them) and helped raise a bunch of grandchildren and great grandchildren. Everything that she did was motivated by what she believed the Bible taught. She loves her family and sacrificed so much to make sure we had opportunities and privileges she didn’t have. Even today, I recognize our family is reaping the benefits of her labors more than our own. My labors alone couldn’t have gotten me where I am today.

Don’t Demonize the Recipients

As my grandmother and other recipients of social programs reveal, it is unquestionably false that *everyone* who benefits from social programs are lazy and will remain lazy. But it is equally false that social programs are essential to bringing families out of poverty or are necessary for a thriving society.

Despite the good they seem to do in some cases, I can’t in good conscience embrace them as a necessary means to escaping poverty. In my experience, I’ve witnessed it hinder more families than it has helped. We give social programs too much credit and the importance of family and faith too little. As a matter of fact, some economists assert that it was during the welfare state the

condition of a particular group of its recipients began to decelerate. As the black economist Thomas Sowell pointed out:

The black family, which had survived centuries of slavery and discrimination, began rapidly disintegrating in the liberal welfare state that subsidized unwed pregnancy and changed welfare from an emergency rescue to a way of life.

Sowell continues to attack the myth that social programs improved the conditions of blacks in America:

The economic rise of blacks began decades earlier, before any of the legislation and policies that are credited with producing that rise. The continuation of the rise of blacks out of poverty did not — repeat, did not — accelerate during the 1960s.

The poverty rate among black families fell from 87 percent in 1940 to 47 percent in 1960, during an era of virtually no major civil rights legislation or anti-poverty programs.

Evidence seems to suggest that the families that have eliminated the poverty cycle while on social programs would have very likely done the same without the programs. While there have been numerous instances of grave injustices towards minority groups in our country that have hindered progress (slavery, Jim Crow), social programs don't seem to be the cause of any significant improvements. Therefore, I want to humbly provide three practical reasons, based on my Christian worldview, why more social programs could actually replace the family, empower the government, and hinder the church.

1. Social programs replace the family.

The family unit is essential to a healthy society. It is in the best interest of the government to defend family values for the protection of children as well as the mental and emotional health of future generations. Scripture is clear that the family is an institution of God, and he is deeply concerned for its wellbeing.

Scripture is also clear that it is the responsibility of the family, not the government, to take care of its members. Paul's instructions in [1 Timothy 5:8](#) are clear: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Earlier in the text, Paul is adamant that widows who have children should not be enrolled into the care of the church.

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Social programs often deceive families into believing that due to government assistance, they no longer have a responsibility to care for their family members. I remember sitting in the barbershop listening to a young man vent because his elderly mother wasn't receiving any government assistance. He obviously cared deeply for his mother. But he didn't see it as his responsibility to care for her. This grieved me deeply, but I understood where he was coming from. Just a few years ago I would have given him an "amen" about how messed up the system was. But based on my worldview, I no longer believe that it's the government's job to take care of my parents. It's my responsibility according to [1 Timothy 5](#) and [Ephesians 6:2](#).

When we depend on the government to take care of our family, we're commissioning the government to take money from other citizens' hard-earned income and give it to our family.

How? The government doesn't generate profit apart from its citizens. Every single dime the government receives comes out of what otherwise would be the wages of its citizens. Therefore, my wife and I have vowed to take responsibility for our parents in their old age, no matter the cost.

Today, the country of Sweden has been presented as a picture of a successful democratic socialist country. But one young man who grew up in Sweden begs to differ. Sebastian Bjernegård, a citizen of Sweden, now living in America, sent me his thoughts on democratic socialism in Sweden. He comments on how government power affects the family,

When government gets too powerful, the family and the church are viewed as secondary to the state. The government presumes it knows what is best for your kids. Soon homeschooling becomes illegal.

Sweden has become one of the most secular countries in the world. The expanse of socialism is often followed by an expanse of secularism. Recently, an article argued that children should have their own right to decide what religion they want to believe in (if they want to), so parents should not be able to force their children to go to church. This belief is now widely held amongst the people I know in Sweden.

As social programs increase, so does government power. Then familial provision *and authority* inevitably decrease.

2. Social programs empower the government.

As Bjernegård explains, social programs empower the government. There is a clear correlation between dependence and power. For an example of this, look no further than the relationship between the parent and the child.

Generally, children are inclined to obey their parents because very early on children recognize that they are wholly dependent on and at the mercy of their parents. They recognize that mommy and daddy give them food and have the power to either take away or buy them new toys. They realize mommy and daddy have the authority to discipline them when they disobey. They even adopt their parents' moral system as children, even if only for a temporary period of time. Some children even retain a certain amount of loyalty to their parents once they're older, standing by their parents even when the parent might be wrong. Here, we clearly see the power of provision.

Not convinced? Observe the relationship between the employee and employer. The employee is dependent upon the employer to make a living — pay bills, make rent, and buy food. Therefore, the employee is motivated to obey his or her employer in order to survive. Due to the dependents' reliance on the providers, the providers are empowered. Consequently, compromises are made by the dependents because of the power possessed by their providers.

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This same relationship exists between the government and beneficiaries of social programs. The benefactors depend on the government for survival, or at least extra income. The institution of the family could become irrelevant and the motivation to work is potentially eroded. Suddenly, programs become “rights” rather than a way out of poverty. The crutch that was meant to be temporary becomes a permanent means of survival. Alexis de Tocqueville rightly observed,

It's not an endlessly expanding list of rights — the “right” to education, the “right” to healthcare, the “right” to food and housing. That's not freedom, that's dependency. Those aren't rights, those are the rations of slavery — hay and a barn for human cattle.

The government becomes master and the recipients become dependents and slaves. In order to keep their rations, compromise is not only necessary but also inevitable. The party that promotes the social programs the dependents deem appropriate and just, this is the group's morality the dependents either accept or tolerate. Like children, they eventually stop thinking for themselves and completely lean upon the government for understanding. Fredrick Douglass appropriately argues,

To make a contented slave, you must make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate his power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery. The man that takes his earnings must be able to convince him that he has a perfect right to do so. It must not depend upon mere force; the slave must know no Higher Law than his master's will. The whole relationship must not only demonstrate, to his mind, its necessity, but its absolute rightfulness.

The government has become God when we believe that there is no higher law. This is extremely dangerous when we know from history that the government (and the Supreme Court) has upheld morally repulsive laws. But too often Christians use passages like Romans 13 as an excuse to sit idly by and accept government actions, even though they are unjust. When we do this, we are submitting to the government as the “higher law.”

For example, while the Bible commands us to pay our taxes, it likewise teaches us that a worker deserves his wages. Does this mean we should rebel, or neglect to pay our taxes, when we believe the tax system is unjust? Not necessarily. However, we shouldn't passively accept unjust tax programs that misuse the resources we've earned. If we live in a “free society,” then, we should take a stand on our constitutional givens to pressure our leaders to represent us in our nation's capital.

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Furthermore, the money we recover in a just or righteous tax program should be used to care for the needs of our fellow saints, our neighbors, and for the glory God, rather than our own lusts and carnal desires. We're all guilty of the latter. I know I am. Christians don't fight for low tax rights to store up treasures on earth, but to invest in our neighbors and fellow laborers for the advancement of the gospel.

Ultimately, a good government should encourage good behavior and discourage bad. At most, I think it's appropriate for the government to reward those who perform acts of charity in their local communities and penalize those who do evil. Unfortunately, our government has become so morally bankrupt that often what is evil is rewarded as if it were good (abortion). Forms of socialism seems to do the opposite and over a period of time labels acts of loves as God given rights. This is destructive to the nation and her citizens.

3. Social programs hinder the church.

In the interview mentioned above, John Piper addressed the subject of socialism. He began with a statement that bears repeating:

In the church no one should go hungry. No one should be without a place to stay. No one should fail to get the healthcare they need. No one should go without a job if it is possible for believers to help them find one. And so on. All of this should happen through the free and uncoerced help of other believers.

When Luke writes in Acts 2:44–45, “All who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need,” what he means is that every need was being met by other believers, even if they had to sell things that they owned in order to help meet them — and this was done freely. It didn’t remove, but rather presumed, the ownership of private property.

The church has a special responsibility to her members. Acts 2:44–45 and 1 Timothy 5:8 are clear that members of the body of Christ are responsible for one another. If a believer is in need, he or she should first seek help from members of their household. If they can’t find help here, they should seek relief from their local congregation.

I’m always saddened when I hear of Christians who are members of a local body and in need of assistance but can’t go to their church for help. Churches that spend their money on bigger buildings, more technology, and private jets for the pastor, and neglect the needs of their members, are an affront to the gospel. A widow with three kids and no relatives should never have to go to the government for assistance. Her burden should be the church’s burden. A Christian family in need of healthcare should never have to depend on a government’s universal healthcare program. They should be able to go to their churches and other Christians for help. There are several Christian healthcare sharing programs that exist as great alternatives to insurance that provide you with the funds you need to get good healthcare and an opportunity to give to the needs of others.

Some will counter, “This may be ideal, but it is wishful thinking.” The same can be said about socialism, which is man’s attempt to address poverty. But what about God’s divine authority? The Christian should never consider a man-made system as practical but the revelation of God idealistic.

God Cares for the Poor

Scripture clearly teaches that God cares for the poor and expects his people to be just as concerned (Deuteronomy 15:4–5). If we only talk about how much we hate forms of socialism but never discuss biblical alternatives that address the problems socialism attempts to address, as one inner city pastor wrote to me, we “lose massive moral foundation from which to speak.”

The government is a good and necessary institution, but God has a lot more to say about church and family. History shows that faith in government can’t bring authentic change. Those who place their hope in government are no different than those who place their hope in horses and chariots (Psalms 20:7).

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as *practical*, but God’s word *idealistic*.”

Some may object that my view only transfers power from the government to the church and family. They are correct. But that power is limited. The family only has power over the members of its household. The church’s power is limited to its members and is voluntarily submitted to. If a family is abusive, in a free society with a limited government, the child can one day leave. If a

church is unbiblical, members are free to leave and find another congregation or walk away from the faith completely. But if a government becomes too powerful, its power has no limits. It can interfere with the family and church. In some cases, its citizens are trapped, unable to even leave the country.

Social programs are a slippery slope that could lead to unjust governments, more broken homes, and dead churches. Therefore, I simply can't embrace them. A free society under a just government gives us plenty of options. We love our neighbors by starting non-profits, building hospitals, and opening schools that address the needs of the people without using the force of the government. What I'm proposing is not easy, but it is a biblical alternative that will require sacrifice, vision, newfound conviction, and a radical shift in how we view church, family, and government.

Imagine a nation where Christians didn't use the force of government to impose unnecessary laws (temperance movement) on unbelievers or to create a theocracy by force, but loved their neighbors through truth (spreading the gospel) and mercy (meeting their needs). I dream of a country where Christians lead the nation in acts of mercy — loving and caring for our neighbors and enemies. Since “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” ([Romans 5:8](#)), we should sacrifice for and die to ourselves, not only for other Christians, but unbelievers as well.

Related Resources

- [Hillary, Bernie, Donald, and Me](#) | John Piper explains why, at 70, he is energized to dream great things for the kingdom and encourages others not to play away their elder years. And he points to Hillary Clinton (turning 69), Bernie Sanders (turning 75), and Donald Trump (turning 70) who are all aspiring to the hardest job in the world despite entering their 8th decade.
- [Change You Can Believe In](#) | As we engage in political discourse and public policy, we must remember that political activism can only accomplish so much. Our hope is not in government to change our nation, but in the proclamation of the good news through churches and Christian families.
- [How Should Christians Think About Socialism?](#) | In episode 710, Pastor John discusses socialism.



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