

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.

