

What About ... Capitalism and Socialism

By Dave DeWitt



I've been thinking about how we got here – economically. Why is it that we live better than the Pharaohs of Egypt and the Caesars of Rome – economically? Why do we have advances in medical procedures, pharmaceutical medications, personal and commercial transportation, clean water, computers, cell phones, color-cable-flat screen-HD (did I leave anything out?) TVs. Actually, any detailed description I'd give of our world, would be out-of-date by the time you read this paper. We have so much food and such a variety, that obesity is a major problem all the way up and down the economic spectrum from wealth to "poverty." Just look around your kitchen or bathroom and compare it to those all through history until very recently. My grandchildren are going to say, "Remember back in the old days when people had to actually physically drive their cars, themselves!"

So how did we get here – from a biblical perspective? Where did the modern (it seems that we have pretty much moved past terms like "post-modern") world come from? The most basic answer is, it came from the nations outlined in the statue of Daniel 2.

Daniel 2:32-34 *The head of that statue was made of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. You continued looking until a stone was cut out without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and crushed them.*

Daniel explained that these were successive kingdoms on the earth leading up to the supernatural stone which represents the Second Coming of Christ and His Millennial Kingdom (Matthew 24, Revelation 20). The head was Babylon, representing the epitome of the ancient empires. Babylon was followed by the *breast and its arms of silver*. This was the Medio-Persian empire which created the idea that the "laws of the Medes and the Persians" were greater than the emperor. Next came the *thighs of bronze*, which was the Greek empire. The Greeks gave us an emphasis on logic, reason, philosophy, and democracy, especially through Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Next came the *legs of iron* which represented the Eastern and Western legs of the Roman Empire. The Romans gave us better roads, tunnels, bridges, freshwater systems, with better, cleaner homes. Then, via invasion, they brought that north to the Goths, Visigoths, Anglos, Saxons, and Norsemen. These became the British, Europeans, Scandinavians, and then the Americans. Now we are in, or approaching, the feet of Daniel's statue. Modernism came to the world through nations of Daniel's statue, what Jesus called *the times of the Gentiles* (Luke 21:24).

Historically, Rome conquered Europe and England, and with it introduced vastly improved technology. But that changed only gradually through the Middle Ages until the industrial revolution(s) which propelled Europe, and its offspring America, into the modern world. France (via revolution) and England (more peacefully) moved away from a monarchy. The remaining monarchies of the western world, the Kaisers of Germany, the Tsars of Russia, the Ottomans of Turkey and the Hapsburgs of Austria-Hungry, fell during WWI. The western nations were left without a king and had to develop ways to govern themselves. Two basic systems emerged. Russia and, after WWII, Eastern Europe adopted socialism. Socialism says "production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole." So, wealth is controlled by the government and equally distributed to everyone. Socialism was enforced by Communism because it could not stand on its own. The west moved toward capitalism. Capitalism is when "a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state." [Both definitions from The New Oxford American Dictionary.] Capitalism catapulted the west into modernism. When you give individuals the opportunity to create and possess personal wealth, the society gets technologically and economically (though not morally) better.

Capitalism is the engine that runs the modern ship. Without an engine, a ship stops, dead in the water. Or if you prefer (as I do) an airplane without an engine will crash. But a ship or an airplane with engines propelling it forward will also eventually crash. It will run into something. A ship needs a rudder and an airplane need controls. Those controls come from socialism. Without being “regulated by the community” capitalism will run amuck. You can argue that capitalists will learn that it is prosperous to be generous, but that has never solved the problem of helping those who are unable to financially “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” Capitalists are just as sinful as socialists.

But don't get the idea that the two systems are co-equal opposites. Not so. Capitalism is the engine. It drives the ship forward. Socialism does not empower anything. It only controls, and control is stifling. It will never motivate anyone to do anything. The controls do not propel the ship or the airplane. The control of socialism is useless unless there is capitalism energizing the society. Also, when socialism gets its way, it tends to attack capitalism. What if the rudder on the ship or the controls on the airplane attacked the engines? Controls are only useful when their control stays out of the way of the engine's ability to provide power. Power is only valuable if it is controlled. Control is only valuable if it controls power without interfering with that power.

But what does the Bible say about all of this? The Bible does not directly address the subject of capitalism or socialism. The kings of Israel were not capitalists, and the Mosaic Law was not socialism. Jesus and the apostles did not describe capitalism or socialism. Paul's command to *work with his own hand, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need* (Ephesians 4:28) is not capitalism, and the voluntary distribution of food in Acts 4 is not socialism. Nonetheless, we can see both the values and dangers of wealth accumulation in the Bible. The Bible has many statements that favor the acquisition of personal wealth.

Proverbs 31:16-18, *She considers a field and buys it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong. She senses that her gain is good; her lamp does not go out at night.*

Ecclesiastes 5:18, *Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.*

1 Corinthians 9:7 *Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not luse the milk of the flock?*

2 Thessalonians 3:10, *For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.*

But the acquisition of wealth is also accompanied by warnings, requiring control. For example, notice how this is presented in Proverbs 21:5-7.

The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty. The acquisition of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor, the pursuit of death.

The violence of the wicked will drag them away, because they refuse to act with justice.

James warns the rich about living in luxury while treating their laborers poorly.

Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you (James 5:4-5).

In conclusion, we must, first-of-all, recognize that Jesus and the apostles focused on heavenly, not earthly, treasure (Matthew 6:19-20; 19:21). Both testaments of the Bible also exhort us to hard work and receive the temporary benefit of that work here on earth, as long as it is controlled by a righteous morality. Right or wrong, our modern world has turned this into the opulent prosperity of capitalism, controlled by socialism. These are not co-equal opposites, but they are both essential for prosperity. Capitalism is the engine, but it will not sufficiently, by itself, control itself. Socialism offers control, but it will not, by itself, produce anything.