

Martin Luther's Bad Idea

On March 10, 1528, Martin Luther published a book that changed the course of history. And not for the better.

His book, "The Book of Vagabonds and Beggars," proposed that the state should establish a social welfare system to replace the church in caring for the poor. Up until that time, the church had made care of the poor a centerpiece of its ministry. Giving to the poor was seen as a sign of Christian virtue and a sign of spiritual vitality in the church.

Luther's proposal was based on the idea of the state religion, which had been a fixture of Christian life since the days of the Roman Empire. In his view the religious State should meet personal needs, while the state-sponsored church should restrict itself to spiritual activities. This idea took hold throughout Protestant northern Europe as the state began taxing citizens to pay for relief for the poor. It was the beginning of the modern welfare state.

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Luther failed to take into account the possibility that the religious state would quit being religious, pushing the church out of community life. Beginning with the French Revolution, the state began to see itself as the source of welfare, not just for the poor, but for the whole society. With godliness marginalized in secular states, the state itself became a substitute for God in the socialist, national socialist and communist philosophies. Leaders like Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini and Mao gained power by promising to use the godlike power of the state to bring prosperity to the masses.

What came instead was poverty and death.

The ghost of Luther's bad idea still haunts the world today.

The welfare states of Greece, Italy and Spain are facing financial collapse, and their European neighbors are not far behind. In countries like Venezuela, ruthless leaders destroyed their national economies to buy power from the masses. Even the rich United States is marching toward a crisis as its national debt and welfare state become unsustainable. No one knows what will happen when these nations become unable to keep their welfare promises.

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What Luther and the modern welfare states have forgotten is that God will not share His glory with usurpers. Like the gods of Egypt humbled in the Exodus, God has shown that the socialist, communist and welfare states are not the gods of provision they claim to be. It is not a question of if, but when, failure will occur. The real question remaining is what the church will do about it.

We must pray that the church will rise to the crisis and the opportunity coming from the collapse of the welfare state. The crisis will come as people's needs are no longer met by government, and social order breaks down. The opportunity comes if the church follows God's admonition to care for the poor, revitalizes church institutions for the poor and creates a godly order in the midst of chaos. The crisis could lead to revival.

Let us pray that the people will once again look to God as their source as they once did—before Luther's bad idea led us astray.

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