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"It Is More Blessed To Give"

- Ac 20:35

Famous are the words of Jesus that "It is more blessed to give than to receive." What is not so well known is the context in which this truth was recorded. No where in any of the four Gospels is this sentence found. These words of Jesus were quoted by the apostle Paul while speaking to a group of elders (Ac 20:32-35). He was instructing them to be in a position of giving silver, gold and clothing to the church, rather than receiving these things from the church!

In light of what Jesus said, should pastors earn their living from the church? In Ac 20, Paul gave the Ephesian elders specific instructions on their duty as elders. Concerning finances, Paul stated that he had coveted no one's silver or gold and that he had paid his own way by "working hard" (20:34-35) with his hands (compare 18:1ff). Following Paul's example, the elders were also to earn their living from a secular job so as to be able to help the weak and live out the words of the Lord Jesus that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Thus, from Ac 20:32-35 it is clear that elders are to be in the financial position of giving to the church, not receiving from it.

Some have tried to draw a distinction between elders and pastors, thinking that "elders" should indeed work in the secular world but that "pastors" are to be totally devoted to church work, spending their time in doctrine and teaching. Such a distinction is both artificial and unbiblical. A study of Ac 20:17, 28-30; Tit 1:5-9; and 1 Pe 5:1-3 will reveal that elder, overseer, and pastor are synonymous terms. Incidentally, the noun "pastor" is used only once in the NT in reference to a church leader (Eph 4:11).

But what of 1 Co 9:14 where it is stated that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living from the gospel? 1 Co 9 concerns the rights of an apostle, someone commissioned by either Jesus or the church to travel around evangelizing and establishing churches ("missionary" is never used in Scripture; such people were called "apostles" and "evangelists"). As is clear from the text, all such people have the "right" (9:12) to financial support. The error is in applying this passage to elders. An elder's ministry is primarily to the saints (not the lost) and he is to proclaim the whole counsel of God's written word (not just the "gospel"). 1 Co 9 was written about apostles (who proclaim the verbal message of salvation to the lost), not about elders (who teach the word of God to the church). Since Paul waived his apostolic "right" to get his "living" from the gospel (9:15, 18), the example he showed the Ephesian elders is all the more compelling (see also 1 Th 2:9; 2 Th 3:7-9).

Temporarily stationed in Ephesus was Timothy, Paul's traveling companion and fellow apostle (1 Th 1:1; 2:6), whom Paul left in Ephesus to squelch strange doctrines (1 Ti 1:3). Concerning the same Ephesian elders as in Ac 20, Paul wrote that some were worthy of double "honor" (1 Ti 5:17). But does "honor" mean "pay?" From the Greek word *time*, it primarily means "respect"; a good parallel verse is 1 Th 5:12-13. There is a specific Greek word for "pay" (*misthos*) and, significantly, it is not used in 5:17. *Time* can in certain contexts mean "price," but since a "price" is the quantity of one thing that is demanded in sale for another, it hardly makes sense in this passage (are elders for sale?). This same word (*time*) is also used in 6:1; are slaves to "pay" their masters?

Using the same reasoning as in 1 Co 9:9, 1 Tm 5:18 states that just as an ox deserves grain, just as a laborer deserves wages, so also an elder deserves respect. One practical application of this "honor" is that an accusation brought against an elder is not to be received unless it is substantiated by more than one witness, (5:19 and Mt 18:16). 1 Tm 5:19 logically follows 5:17-18 if "honor" refers to "respect" (an "accusation" involves dishonor), but follows awkwardly if "honor" refers to "pay."

There is one instance from the third century B.C. secular Greek when *time* was used to refer to a physician's honorarium, but this is a rare usage and is far removed in time and context from Paul's writing. To be fair, *time* is also used in 1 Tm 5:3 where "honor" is to be given to widows who are really in need (the NIV renders it as "proper recognition"). This occurrence of *time* could conceivably be reflected in giving the widow food, helping her with her house and yard work, visiting her, offering her living quarters if needed, and perhaps even monetary assistance. It is similarly used in Mk 7:10 and Ac 28:10. Thus, it is within the realm of possibility that in some cases "honor" to an elder might include giving him a love offering. However, even if "honor" is stretched to mean "honorarium," then balancing 5:17 with Ac 20:33-35 would still require elders to also work at a secular vocation so as to be self-supporting and not dependent on the church.

Ga 6:6 commands he who is taught the word to "share all good things" with his teacher. Thus, it is not a violation of Scripture for an individual to share something with his instructor, and not uncommonly, that instructor will also be a pastor/teacher. However, this is a far cry from having career clergy who are totally dependent on the church for their livelihood. For example, Paul accepted gifts when given to him (Php 4:10-20), but he did not depend on such gifts. Instead, he worked hard with his own hands (Ac 18:1-4). Also, the "good things" of Ga 6:6 encompass much more than money; anything that shows appreciation for the teacher's ministry qualifies as a good thing.

What did Peter mean in 1 Pe 5:2 when he exhorted the elders to shepherd God's flock voluntarily and not "for sordid gain"? "Sordid gain" is from a single Greek word, *aischrokerdos*. Does this refer to "tainted" or "dirty" money? Surely not! *aischros* means "shame, disgrace" and *kerdos* means "gain, profit, advantages." A related term, *aischrokerdes*, is used in Tit 1:7 where elders are required not to be "fond of sordid gain." 1 Ti 3:3 parallels this with a requirement that elders be free from the "love of money." Thus, *aischrokerdes* is a virtual synonym for being "greedy for money." Peter's point was that elders are not to serve in order to get any kind of personal "gain" from their position. R.C.H. Lenski (*The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter*, 219) points out that since elders were not salaried or paid, Peter's warning was that elders not use their position to seek the trade of the church in business matters. (How many business men have joined the "First Church" primarily to climb the social and economic ladder?).

So where does this leave us? Should the church employ professional pastors? Such an occupation was not only foreign to the NT church but was even discouraged (Ac 20:32-35). As with Paul, elders can receive "good things" shared voluntarily with them by the saints to whom they minister, but elders are primarily to supply their own needs by working hard in the secular world.

Requiring elders to be self-supporting would free large sums of money currently designated for professional pastors to be used instead in support of missionaries or to help the poor. It would also place a pastor's motives above reproach in an era of religious shysters who purposely fleece the flock in order to finance their exorbitant lifestyles (Eze 34:1-6). In addition, creating a class of salaried ministers tends to elevate them above the average believer and fosters an artificial laity/clergy distinction. Finally, salesmen tend to be extra nice toward those to whom they hope to sell

something. Hiring a career clergyman puts him in a similar salesman-customer relationship, and this, no doubt to some degree, affects his dealings with significant contributors (money talks).

- S.A.

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