

Setting Aside Qualified Men to Labor in the Word

The principle of paying church leaders is so widely accepted that in most circles an article on the topic would elicit a chorus of yawns. In family-integrated circles, however, there are many new churches being formed with an intense (and correct) conviction that ministry is not to be confined to a few professionals. While this focus on broad participation in ministry continues to produce many wonderful results, often an unintended outcome is a diminished emphasis on the importance of setting aside qualified men for the ministry of the word. In those instances, a clear Biblical teaching has been lost, and the church is the worse for it.

Consider Ephesians 4:11-13: “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, *for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry*, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”. One truth is evident – God never intended for the New Testament church to have a professional class to do the work of ministry. The saints do the work of the ministry, and that is how He builds up His body, through every member having honored roles and important, though diverse, functions (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). However, that truth should not cause us to neglect the companion truth that God gives the church qualified and gifted men to equip the saints for that work, with the results being unity of the faith, the knowledge of Christ, and maturity.

In 1 Timothy 5:17,18, Paul tells us something very important about those men that God has given to the church: “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’”

From this passage, we learn:

- ☛ A subset of elders are worthy of double honor, which is subsequently explained as including financial support.
- ☛ Elders who rule well, and “especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching” (NASB), constitute this subset who are to be paid.
- ☛ The underpinnings for this come from both the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 25:4) and the teachings of Jesus Christ Himself (Luke 10:7).

Paul expands on this in 1 Corinthians 9:9-14: “For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.’ Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.”

Here Paul forcefully makes the case that those laboring in the word have a right to a living from those labors, even though he himself frequently forfeited that right to eliminate barriers to the gospel. We should recognize that the Scriptures make clear our obligation to pay elders who work hard at preaching and teaching, and that the forfeiting of that right ought to be at the discretion of the laborer. In other words, the primary teacher(s) in your church should make a case for *not* being paid, if that is their desire.

Why is this important? Well, we have seen that this principle applies to those who work hard at preaching and teaching, which implies the importance of having men who are both willing and able to consistently toil in the word. This is the point – the ministry of the word, done right, is an occupation in the truest sense. It occupies, and there are no shortcuts. This is why in Acts 6:2, the twelve, recognizing the absolute requirement for undistracted attention, say “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God”, and then in verse 4, “But we will devote ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word”. Here the specific distraction was ministry to widows, a worthy ministry indeed, but not their primary function in the body, and the solution was appointing deacons. In a similar way, providing for one’s family is a legitimate distraction (lest the man be worse than an unbeliever; 1 Timothy 5:8), and the remedy is making continual devotion to prayer and the ministry of the word financially possible.

Jesus both taught and practiced this principle. In Matthew 10:9,10, as Jesus was sending the disciples out two by two to preach, he says this, “Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food.” These men were able to immediately and wholeheartedly engage in their God-given mission because they did not have to acquire the gold and other things needed – their labor simply merited their support. And again in Luke 10:7, when the Lord appointed seventy others, also sending them out two by two, He says, “And remain in the same house, eating and drinking such things as they give, for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not go from house to house.” Do you see the pattern? God has purposefully placed people with resources – money, homes, food, etc – so that the ministry of the word can flourish unabated and the glorious gospel of grace can go forth to the ends of the earth. To this end, Jesus Himself was a fulltime preacher who received his provision from others, as recorded in Luke 8:3, “...and many others who provided for Him from their substance”.

The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith summarizes it well: “Pastors are required to give constant attention to the service of Christ in His churches; they are to be engaged in the ministry of the Word and in prayer, and to seek the welfare of men's souls as those that must give account to the Lord. It is therefore imperative that the churches to which they minister should give them, according to the churches’ ability, not only all due honor, but such abundance of this world's material good as will enable them to live in comfort, without the need to entangle themselves in secular employment, and which will also suffice to enable them to exercise hospitality towards others. Such an arrangement is required by the law of nature itself, and by the express command of our Lord Jesus, who has decreed that ‘they that preach the gospel should live of the gospel’.”

What happens if we are cavalier regarding the exhortations of Scripture in this area? At least three things:

1. **Our steady diet is bi-vocational teaching.** God bless tent-makers. Having been an unpaid elder with a fulltime job, I have always been a tent-maker and I am thankful to be one. However, if the church’s steady diet is my teaching, as a man who provides for my family through secular employment, the fellowship loses. Teaching once a month or less, I can muster the time and energy to properly prepare to stand before God’s people to faithfully represent the truth of His word, knowing that next week’s schedule will be far more forgiving. Not so for the man who is required to do so week after week. Eventually, the realities of life will steal from his preparation, and the teaching – and the taught – will suffer. I know many such men. One of them confided to me that when he started the fellowship, he would spend a lavish amount of time in preparation for each Sunday, but that a year later he can only allot a few hours on Saturday. Has this brother lost his zeal for God and the church? Should we frown on him for his dwindling commitment of time? No – rather we will acknowledge that he cannot afford to be continually devoted to the ministry of the word, because that ministry must share with another essential obligation.
2. **We create an opening for those who contradict sound doctrine.** When we think of the ministry of the word, our minds normally go to the preaching of the Sunday morning message. However, as the qualifications for elders in Titus make clear, defending sound doctrine is a key element as well. Titus 1:9 lists this as the final qualification: “holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.” Establishing and

defending sound doctrine takes a lot of time. At any given time, someone in your fellowship is talking to a friend, reading a book, or listening to a radio program that is chalk full of nonsense. In many instances, though, the nonsense is subtle, mixed with truth, and disorienting in the way that it initially seems to be logical and/or Biblical. This represents a threat to the church, and these situations can quickly take on a life of their own unless someone who is qualified has the time to gently address the issues without delay. For another of Paul's exhortations in this regard, see 2 Timothy 4:1-5 – a powerful reminder of how central this function is for church leaders. False teachers and itching ears are not hard to find. Given the state of the modern evangelical church, we should not be naïve in thinking that this is a “once in a blue moon” function in a church. There is a regular requirement for careful, thoughtful study and response. Translation: time and devotion.

3. **We tempt men to sacrifice their families and thereby disqualify themselves from eldership.** O the shared guilt of shepherds and the church in this area! How many are the men who shortchange their wives and children out of a sense of duty towards the church. This can happen whether or not a man has another occupation, of course, but it is especially likely among men who provide for their families through secular employment and also carry the bulk of the teaching load, and it causes them to disqualify themselves from the very office which they are exhausting themselves to fill. This is very unloving of the church. Paul says that an elder must be above reproach in the management of his household (1 Timothy 3:4,5), having a wife and children who exhibit the fruit of lavish care (Titus 1:6), even while he faithfully executes his service to the church. We are not at liberty, brethren, to force or even allow men to choose between these obligations, and a key part of this equation is committing to set aside qualified men – through financial support – for continual devotion to the ministry of the word.

When I look back on my “career path” (those who know the story will laugh), I see a faithful God giving over-abundant resources to a very ordinary man, well beyond any reasonable expectation. Why has He done this? For my own comfort and personal security? May it never be! I passionately believe that the key reason God has given our family resources is so we would put them in play within the local church, so that our church would benefit from the continual devotion of at least one man to prayer and the ministry of the word. Simply put, God is staging resources to send laborers into His harvest. As Paul says in Galatians 6:6, “Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.” Let us commit together to honor certain qualified men in this way out of obedience to Christ and for the good of His bride.

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