

The Work Of Benevolence

Introduction. New Testament teaching on the subject of benevolence needs to be studied in its entirety. It has been a very neglected subject. Many false notions exist in the minds of Christians with reference to the work of the church in this field. The truth concerning this subject cannot be determined by sentiment or emotion. Neither can it be learned from what we have done or are doing about such work, for we might be wrong. We can rely only upon the scriptures to know what God's purpose with the church is in this matter.

I. ***The Work Of Benevolence Was Never Used To Spread The Gospel***

- A. Benevolence is the fruit of being a Christian -- not the means of propagating it.
 - 1. Food and clothing were never offered by the early church as a means of getting people to hear and accept the gospel.
 - 2. Paul did not take a contribution with him from the church when he went to Europe for the first time. There were probably as great a percentage of poor and destitute then as now. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation and if men will not hear it without being bribed with benevolence they stand condemned anyway.
- B. People who are attracted by benevolence will turn away when the benevolence is discontinued for their convictions concerning the gospel do not constitute the grounds of their attraction to it.
- C. Multitudes followed the Lord for the loaves and fishes, physical healing, and the rewards of political office, but they turned away when He taught something they did not like (John 6:26, 66).

II. ***Much Of The Benevolence In The Scriptures Is An Individual Effort***

- A. If one studies the proper scriptures, one will notice that many of them are directed to Christian individuals (Matthew 25:31-46; Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 6:17-18; Hebrews 13:16; James 1:27; 1 John 3:17-18). If one cannot see the individual effort contrasted to a congregational effort, then one is simply not willing to see the difference.
- B. There are important reasons why the individual Christian should do this work himself and not by proxy by paying someone else to do it for him.
 - 1. This work makes us more like Christ (Mark 10:45; Acts 10:38).
 - 2. Personal contact with the destitute and their needs, and the personal strength that comes by ministering to them will edify our souls (Acts 20:35-36; Titus 3:8).

- C. The individual Christian is charged with the care of those who are in his own family and therefore have the right to depend upon him for sustenance.
 - 1. Those who do not care for their own are worse than infidels (1 Timothy 5:8).
 - 2. The church cannot assume the obligation of the individual (1 Timothy 5:16). It would be interesting to know how many of the aged in the institutions built and maintained by these churches are the responsibility of individual Christians fellowshiped by the churches in spite of this sin.
 - 3. Jesus condemned the Jews for this very sin (Matthew 15:1-9). They were excusing themselves from the obligation to provide for their parents, and thus by their traditions making void God's commandment. Churches are excusing those who sin and have become a party to their sin by accepting the obligation in their stead.
- D. The final judgment deals with individuals according to the works each one has done (2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 20:1-15). We will not be judged by the benevolence the congregation has done. The individual is not always responsible for what the congregation does or does not do.

III. ***God Has Restricted The Benevolent Work Which The Church Can Do***

- A. The church is not to undertake to meet the needs of all humanity.
 - 1. It could not do so if it tried. The resources of the church would quickly be exhausted if it started taking care of all the dependents of society.
 - 2. It could not do the legitimate work that God assigned it if it undertook such a burden of benevolence (1 Timothy 5:16). The church was never a relief society.
- B. Other agencies in the world are to engage in benevolent work with God's approval and in harmony with His plan while only the church is to preach the gospel.
 - 1. The family in the home is charged with caring for its own (Ephesians 6:1-3; 1 Timothy 5:4, 8, 10, 16).
 - 2. One of the functions of God ordained government is to care for its needy and for this reason, among others, Christians pay taxes (Luke 20:25).
 - 3. Only the church is the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).
- C. The only contribution which any congregation made out of its treasury in the New Testament day was to poor saints (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35;

11:27-30; Romans 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1, 12).

- D. God even limited the "saints" for whom the church can care in its benevolence (1 Timothy 5:1-16). The church is not to be burdened with assuming the obligation to do the benevolence which others should individually discharge or with a general program of benevolence which God did not design for it but is to keep its strength and resources free from such obligations that it may do what God intends for it to do. We are not free to place upon the church what we feel is a "good work."

IV. Churches Can And Should Do Benevolence In Harmony With God's Will

- A. The "multitude of them that believed" (Acts 4:32-35) and "all that believed" (Acts 2:44-45) in Jerusalem sold their lands and houses and "pooled or combined" their funds in the beginning of the church to meet a state of emergency that existed and "neither was there any among them that lacked."
- B. The congregation at Antioch sent to the relief of the brethren in Judea when the famine made them destitute. The contributing church sent directly by its own messengers to the churches in need and the benevolence thus contributed was put in the hands of the elders of the local congregation for distribution. This is the divine pattern without any human organizations or institutions (Acts 11:27-30).
- C. Many congregations in several regions sent to relieve the Jerusalem church when that congregation had more needy saints than it could care for out its own resources (Romans 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1, 12).
 - 1. Each church made up its fund by the contribution of its own members and not by soliciting money from other churches to enable them to do this work.
 - 2. Each congregation selected and approved its own messenger or messengers to who this contribution was entrusted for delivery to Jerusalem. No church handled the money of any other church or became the messenger of any other church.
 - a) In none of these examples did any church set up a benevolent society or institution to care for the needy. The work was done under the oversight of the elders of each church.
 - b) No church sent its needy to another church to be cared for. Each church cared for its own and if its obligation to care for its own was greater than it could meet, other churches contributed to this church in need.

- c) No church contributed to another church to enable it to promote and carry on a "good work" -- they sent only when the church was in need.
- d) These examples constitute the pattern for benevolent work among churches of Christ just as Acts 20:7 is a pattern of worship on the Lord's day and just as Acts 14:23 and Philipians 1:1 constitute a pattern for church organization.
 - (1) If these examples of how New Testament churches did their benevolent work do not constitute a pattern for churches today in doing their benevolent work, then there is no pattern for anything in the New Testament.
 - (2) We are left free to worship, organize, and work according to our own will and New Testament examples have no meaning (cf. Colossians 2:23).

Conclusion. Since God has given by divine wisdom an organization to the church, the congregation, and has made it sufficient to accomplish His purpose, it is the only medium of work and worship through which the Christian can accomplish the purpose of evangelizing the world and we must be satisfied with His will, His way and His word.