

“I Robbed Other Churches ...”

“Or did I commit a sin in abasing myself that ye might be exalted because I preached the gospel to you for naught? I robbed other churches, taking wages of them that I might minister unto you; and when I was present and was in want I was not a burden on any man; for the brethren, when they came from Macedonia, supplied the measure of my want; and in everything I kept myself from being burdensome unto you, and so will I keep myself” (2 Cor. 11:7-9).

Paul later wrote that he would boast only in his weakness (2 Cor. 11:30) and so he does here. It is right that he who plants a vineyard should eat of its fruit (1 Cor. 9:7); that the laborer is worthy of his hire (Lk. 10:7). Yet while the Corinthian church owed its existence to the labors of Paul and not to these self-proclaimed “apostles of Christ,” Paul had abased himself in Corinth that even in times of personal want he did not call upon those whose existence in Christ he was responsible for but rather either made tents to support himself (Acts 18:3) or else he accepted the volunteered aid of Macedonian brethren (2 Cor. 11:9).

Perhaps it is wise to pause here and think about these brethren and the implication of the “wages” they gave to Paul. In Paul’s first letter to these brethren, he argued strongly for the right of the gospel proclaimer to be supported in the work he did (1 Cor. 9:1-14). Yet, although he argues for that right even then he declared he had not exercised that right while in their midst. In years past some brethren argued that once a church is organized and has elders and deacons, it is sinful to have a “located preacher” preach regularly to them. They must practice “mutual edification” in which each willing man takes his turn at the podium. And while there are evangelists in God’s orders, these men must be moving about establishing new works, setting in elders, then moving on to other fields where there is no church so that he may start the procedure all over again. And, while he can receive support from churches who help him in his work, he cannot receive a “stipulated salary.” The error of this theory is manifest in the example of Timothy whom Paul sent to Ephesus to “charge certain men not to teach a different doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:4). Timothy preached to a church, which he had not begun, and which also had elders (Acts 20:17), and he remained there for a period of time. He did that which some brethren said he could not do; preached regularly to a fully organized church. As to receiving a stipulated salary, the term “wages” (which Paul received from Macedonian brethren) is a term which describes a soldier’s pay and thus implies a set amount one was to receive.

As to these churches Paul “robbed” that he might minister to Corinth, we have no specific name, just a reference to a region. The region was Macedonia and Luke speaks of three congregations in that region: Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Of these three the most likely church who volunteered help to Paul would be Philippi for Paul wrote to them some years later thanking them for their fellowship with him in Rome which fellowship had been of long-standing practice. They had sent to him at least twice when he left Philippi for Thessalonica (Phil. 4:15-16).

Paul did not literally “rob” the Macedonian church (or churches). Every evidence is that their assistance was altogether voluntary. Paul only uses this word to indicate he took funds from them to do a service for Corinthian brethren. Paul accepted the Macedonian offered aid because he was certain that brethren whose concern for his well being (as well as a desire to have fellowship in furthering the gospel other than in their own region) prompted them to raise and send funds to him who had not asked for them. These were the same brethren of whom Paul wrote that they gave “beyond their power” to aid Jerusalem saints and of whom Paul apparently expressed reluctance in taking their offering; they entreated Paul to take their gift (2 Cor. 8:3-4). They were a caring and generous group of brethren. Such a spirit on the part of these Macedonian brethren is commendable.

We have very little comments from Paul as to why he neither asked nor received funds from Corinth, but if there is any indication that Paul ever asked money for himself from anyone we are not aware of it. We do know that the Corinthians’ manifested attitude, coupled with Paul’s desire to “cut off” any occasion his adversaries might use to attack him, caused him later to write, “I will not be a burden to you: for I seek not yours, but you” (2 Cor. 12:14).

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