



"Is it scriptural for a congregation to support a full-time worker?"

I have no doubt that questions similar to this, have been asked time and time again in the course of the history of British Churches of Christ. I certainly know that the subject was being discussed over sixty years ago, when the Elders of the church in Hindley suggested to me that I should consider doing what they described as 'full-time evangelistic work'.

Evidently, there are those among us for whom the issue has not yet been resolved; hence this month's question.

The Principle

So, let us lay down an irrefutable and undeniable principle; namely, that no question concerning the doctrine or practice of the Church can be considered to have been resolved, until it is resolved *scripturally*. Indeed, we see that this fact is recognized in the question "Is it *scriptural*?"

I believe that the answer must be an emphatic 'Yes!' and the proof is found in the ninth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, verses 4 to 14.

The circumstances in which Paul introduces the subject.

In the previous chapter, ch. 8, he has dealt at some length with the matter of Christian liberty and has shown that Christians must be prepared to forego perfectly legitimate rights, if to insist on the exercising of such rights endangers or harms the soul of a weaker brother.

That chapter closes at v. 13, which begins with the word '*Therefore*', and contains the statement with which Paul concludes his argument. Then, in chapter 9, he points out that he, also, has rights; rights that, for the good of both the Church and the Lord's work in general, he has not exercised, and he proceeds to mention two of them.

- First, he asserts his right to receive material support from his brethren, whilst he is engaged in preaching the Gospel. He specifically mentions '*the right to eat and drink*' (v.4).
- He then extends this right to cover the material needs of a wife also, should he choose to be accompanied and supported in his labours by a wife, just as other brethren, some of whom he names.

Two Rights Asserted.

The first argument says, in effect: -

" I have the right to receive support from the people of God, whilst I do this work; the right to receive whatever assistance I need, either financial or material".

The second argument says: -

"And not only for myself, but also for a wife, if I choose to take a wife. After all, other apostles do this! The rest of them do it, including Peter! And the Lord's own brothers do it also! Among all those who spend their lives in the work of the Gospel, are Barnabas and I to be the only ones who are denied this right?"

Four Arguments put forward

Having made these claims, in v.7, he then proceeds to establish them by presenting four very clear arguments which demonstrate the principle in action, and which he feels sure, his readers will readily recognize and acknowledge.

1st: **The Argument Based On Equity – On Fairness.** (v.7)

He declares that it is just and fair, and, in evidence, presents the following examples from everyday life.

- i) The Soldier's needs are provided for.
 "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?" The soldier is not required to provide his own equipment or his own rations. Such items are provided for him.
 The word 'expense' is significant. It is the word 'opsonion', which, in 2nd Cor. 11: 8, is rendered 'support'. On the four occasions when this word occurs in the New Testament scriptures it means 'wages, expense, charges, support'.
- ii) The Planter of a Vineyard, expects to eat some of the fruit that the vineyard produces.
- iii) The Shepherd who cares for the flock, has the right to expect the flock to take care of him.

Paul is insisting that, by the same token, those whose lives are spent in the work of the Lord have the clearly established right to have their material needs met, and it should not be necessary for them to beg or to depend on the charity of their brethren.

2nd **The Argument Based On God's Law**, v.8.

In v. 8, he asks, **"Are you now telling me that this is merely a human viewpoint?"** In other words, "Are you saying that, even if this is the way the world conducts its affair, what the world does has no bearing on the Church of God? Then, let me show you that the Law (of God) lays down the same principle. It is written in the Law of Moses. **'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.'**" (Deut. 25:4)

Incidentally, let me point out that, in 1st Tim. 5:18, this principle is also applied to Elders. Elders who are "full-time Elders" and who may need support are as entitled to receive it from the Church, as is the shepherd who cares for the flock.

In v.9, Paul injects a slightly humorous note as he thinks about the verse in Deut. 25, when he asks, **"Did God issue this command because He is especially concerned about oxen? Do you not see that this is an illustration used for our sakes?"**

In v. 10, he says that a man 'works in hope' and mentions, as examples, the ploughman and the reaper. They expect to share the results of their work. Even in our modern society the validity of this principle is recognized. Farm-workers, coal-miners, fishermen, factory-workers, all expect to enjoy benefits from that which their work produces.

3rd **The Argument Based On Simple Gratitude**, v.12.

"If we have sown spiritual good among you, why should it be regarded as 'too much', amazing, or surprising, if we expect to reap your material blessings?" Some of the churches Paul had served were quick to acknowledge their indebtedness to him and had spontaneously sent help to meet his material needs, thus making it unnecessary for him to 'work with his own hands', to support himself as he preached the Gospel. Phil. 4:16. **"You sent me help once and again".**

Whilst we should never regard full-time work for the Lord as a profession or a job, we surely realize that those who have the desire and the ability – (and therefore the responsibility) – to undertake such work, will be much more effective and useful, if their minds are freed from concerns about the need to earn a living.

Thankfully, there are brethren, who whilst recognizing that they, personally, are unable for whatever reason, whether disposition or ability, or even because of circumstance, to spend their lives in the Lord's work, nevertheless understand that they are able to help in their own special way, because they are able to earn money which may be turned back into the support of those who are able to undertake the work of the Kingdom. The 'prophet's hands' still need to be held up, even today!

I recall a certain brother who gave generously to meet a particular need, and who said, "Perhaps this is my talent. Perhaps it is the only thing I can do!" He was too modest! I later heard him preach the Word very effectively!

4th, **The Principle Illustrated In The Scriptures.** vv.13-14.

“Those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple... in the same way the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” See again, 1st Tim. 5: 17-18.

Here Paul is alluding to the fact that any priest, Jewish or Pagan, enjoyed certain privileges. For instance, the priest received a share of the offerings brought to the altar (v.13). Indeed, if we examine the Jewish priestly system, it comes as something of a surprise when we discover just how much material support the priests received. The fact is that they were well provided for and enjoyed a fairly high degree of comfort.

Priestly Provision.

There were numerous regular sacrifices from which the priest received his portion.

- i) From 'the Whole Burnt Offering', he received only the hides and skins, but these he was able to sell. (Lev. 5;8)
- ii) From the 'Sin Offering', only the fatty portions were offered in sacrifice, and the priest received all the flesh.
- iii) This was also true of the 'Trespass Offering'.
- iv) The 'Meal Offering', which consisted of flour, oil and wine, was also given to the priests for their personal use. Again, only a token amount was offered on the altar (Lev.2:, and 7:9-10).
- v) The 'Peace Offering' was shared between the altar, the priests and the worshipper.
- vi) The priest also received for his own use, the 'first fruits' of the barley, wheat, honey, olives, vine fig trees and pomegranates' (Deut.18:3-4).
- vii) He also had the right to '1/50th of the crop', since he had no land of his own.
- viii) Even 'the tithe'- the tenth of everything that grew in the earth, which could be used for food, was shared between the priests and the Levites.
- ix) The priests also received a 24th part of the 'dough', made of wheat, barley, oats or rye.
- x) And what is surely remarkable is the fact that, when the nation was at war, the priests received a share of any spoil that was captured in battle. The spoil was usually divided equally between the army and the people, and the priests received a 1/500th of the half given to the army, and a 1/50th part of the half given to the people. (Num.31:25-47)

Having been brought up under this system, the Jewish Christians had no difficulty in understanding the principle which Paul is explaining to the Corinthians; namely, that the man whose life is spent in the service of God has both the privilege and the right to receive the support of God's people.

Conclusion

It is regrettable that, as plain as is the teaching presented in 1st Cor. 9, we, as Churches of Christ, claiming to appeal for a 'return to New Testament Christianity', appear to have been loathe to put it into practice.

In the year 1840, the very first full-time evangelist to work among the churches, George C. Reid, wrote to James Wallis, the editor of the early "Christian Messenger" expressing the conviction that if capable men were to be encouraged to devote their lives to the preaching of the Gospel, provision should be made for their adequate support.

But, I repeat, the principle is there for all to see and will only be ignored by those spiritually immature or scripturally untaught. The unpalatable truth is that, if we were passionate about preaching the Gospel and were willing to increase our giving, it would be possible to support more dedicated and capable workers in the Lord's Field, and our congregations generally, would be in a healthier condition than they are today.

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