

## GIVING: And Grasping

“If we must have hired ministers, I hope that they will never receive salaries comparable to those earned in other professions. God forbid that any man be attracted to the pulpit or ministry by the salary offered. Let his message always be reinforced by self-denial.” I wrote those words (Free To Speak. Ch. 27, p. 34) about twenty years ago expressing the feelings I had from my youth, and they still express my feelings.

We commonly speak of hiring and firing preachers. (Do we forget about our motto of speaking as the Bible speaks?) I always deplored the concept of being hired to do spiritual service. My desire was to serve God and others by teaching, preaching, and serving their needs and I was deeply appreciative when brethren supported me so I could devote myself fully to that. But it was always repulsive to me to have someone indicate that I was preaching, sitting with the sick, visiting shut-ins, giving rides to and from assemblies, showing hospitality in my home, leading singing, standing with the grieving, or conducting a funeral because that was what I was hired to do. Declining to do those things unless paid would tend to make one look a lot like a hireling grasping for money. It would add a taint of commercialism to spiritual service. I trust that most of you who serve congregations hold these same feelings.

In August, Abilene Christian University released findings of a survey of the salaries of our ministers, reported in The Christian Chronicle, September 2004. In a small congregation they may be paid \$18,000 per year, but others in large congregations may exceed \$150,000. Those in the six figure category cannot declare, like Peter and John, “silver and gold have I none.” Salaries of pulpit ministers, according to the survey, average from \$47,000 to \$102,000. I am not accusing anyone, but there are some tempting figures in there. Why train for another career when the church pays better?

I can identify with those on the lower end of the scale who have to squeeze every dollar. In our 57 years together, Lea and I bought only one new car – a 1947 Plymouth. But I am not a victim calling for sympathy for I chose that course. The amount of my support was always known by the congregation. However now, salaries are so inflated in some congregations that the elders do not reveal the amount to the congregation but will lump it in some more general expenditure. It has always been my contention that the ones doing the paying should know how much is being paid. Since they are doing the giving, they should know how it is being spent, this being a difference in practices of churches and businesses. Has the congregation become a business?

It is interesting to look again at the historical record, not for dogmatic patterns, but to examine attitudes and principles. Jesus never charged admission or took up a collection. Could he not have rightly pled for a love-offering at each gathering to cover his expenses and those of his entourage? Who could have refused a coin or two in gratitude for the meal he provided for the multitude? He could have “invited” gifts from families of those

he healed. He did not send word to Jericho that he would come for speaking engagements if they would forward money to pay for his journey.

And Paul. That great apostle, in self-denial, preferred to make tents rather than to ask for money of those to whom he ministered. For his evangelism, he did receive money from fellow disciples at times but there is no record of him asking for it or taking up “love-offerings.” “Oh, but it is a different world we live in today!” you may be thinking. Please explain the difference that demands commercializing our activities.

Both Jesus and Paul missed out on a source of income. They could have let scribes make copies of their discourses to publish, and sell. And what a gold mine David missed by not copyrighting and publishing his hymnal!

In contrast, in our time a whole “industry” has evolved relating to religion. Radio and television programs which plead for money have become big business. Look through the big Bible bookstore and its catalogue. Spiritual-minded people have produced all sorts of music, videos, literature, and study materials to help you in your serving Christ. Good for them. But don’t use them without permission! And “permission” usually means paying money for them.

Am I being too harsh and over-playing my hand? Yes, if I were making dogmatic pronouncements. These are all judgmental matters with no defining lines between giving and grasping. Each producer of materials must abide by his own conscience, and I am only trying to sensitize the conscience.

None of “our” radio or television programs ask for money. Great! Much literature and spiritually oriented material is given free by both congregations and individuals. Great! Much of what is copyrighted, restricted, and sold may be mostly on a non-profit basis. Some who bring in great income from sales and contributions may be putting all of it back into the ministry. We commend them for that. Some display the lifestyle of the wealthy. Even where we see evidence of grasping instead of giving, we reserve our judgment because that will have to be settled with God rather than with us.

Having my own publishing ministry has caused me to face the issues that I am calling to your attention. I would have preferred to have done all my career ministry and publishing ministry without remuneration but that was beyond my reach. I sell books in order to be able to distribute them. I have made some profit which has greatly helped me in meeting living expenses. Unsolicited contributions have enabled me to give out over 45,000 copies of *Free In Christ* without charge along with a much smaller number of my other titles. I distribute free books as donations allow. All of my writings are accessible on the internet at my website <[freedomstring.org](http://freedomstring.org)> free of copyright restrictions or charges for reading or printout. Why should I impose a restrictive copyright if my desire is for people to read my material?

I review these matters, not just to show you how superbly saintly I am { : - ( , but hoping to give you insight into many other ministries also that are meant to give rather than to grasp, Also, I want to encourage you to be more sure of the use of your donations.

It would be ugly of me to suggest that preachers might avoid the truth in order to preserve their income, wouldn't it? We are all too dedicated to truth and too courageous in presenting it to be suspected of such a thing. But let me leave this little thumb-tack in your seat. Many of you preachers in the Church of Christ (perhaps a majority) no longer hold the conviction that the use of instrumental accompaniment to singing is sinful, but do you ever share that with the congregation – whether you are in the \$18,000 or \$150,000 bracket? Is there no vital issue, whether about music or something else, that you skirt around in order to save your job? I am asking, not accusing.

I admit to having had struggles with this problem as I began to break free of legalism. It was easy to rationalize that it was better to keep peace than teach new-found truth, or to wait until the soil was more favorable, or to wait for someone else to do it. In view of that, I must also admit that it was not until I received my last salary check from the church that I truly became a free man in Christ. Then I could speak or write my convictions without consulting with, or gaining approval of, any person or group, and I could do it without my family's income being in jeopardy. If you have never faced such a struggle as a preacher, either you are a couple of notches above the rest of us or you have never learned anything beyond our accepted traditions.

We do well to ask God for understanding of his will, for courage in teaching it, for wisdom in applying it, and for his grace to cover us when we lack in those areas. May our hands always be outstretched to help rather than to grasp. []

(Cecil Hook; September 2004)

Talkin' Texas: Mainly in East Texas, the state has some 23.4 million acres of forest and woodland, including four national forests.