

GIVING: To Spend For What?

For what may we rightly use the money contributed to the church? We might wonder how many frustrating and misspent hours have been wasted in meetings of elders arguing this question. Inflating this into a big issue has divided churches. Have we not better things to do?

In previous weeks I have de-emphasized the use of our resources for maintaining a system of religion and stressed the use for serving the needs of persons. By that I am not trying to lay down laws and dictate for you but I am inviting you to re-study this matter. For the use of the money in your bank account and that of the congregation, two principles stand out. Its use should be motivated by love rather than by law and its use should be decided by our wisdom rather than by supposed laws and regulations.

Since the money in my account and that of the church are both the Lord's money, the main difference in the use of it is that I alone must have proper motivation and wisdom in using the money in my account and the group must have proper motivation and wisdom in using the church's account. I must be guided by my love for my family and fellowman and try to make the wisest decision as to how to serve best. That is what the church family must do also. And the church family may agree to spend its money on the same things my family agrees to spend its money for. Whatever may be sinful to purchase from the church treasury is also sinful to purchase from your resources for they both belong to the Lord.

I may see fit to put a basketball hoop or volleyball court in my yard. Why cannot the church do that in the parking lot (assuming that a non-scriptural parking lot is permissible)? It may not be wise to buy the sports equipment, however, if I use the money saved up to buy my child's glasses. That would be misappropriating money. In similar manner, money designated for one purpose by the church can be misappropriated if some other use is made of it.

If a congregation agrees on a budget which allows a certain amount of money to buy refreshments for vacation Bible school, or any other moral purpose thought to be wise, and people contribute to the church knowing of the appropriation, what wrong could there be in using it in that manner? If you can rightly buy Christmas toys for your children, on what grounds could it be wrong for a congregation to buy them for destitute children if that is what the members gave the money for? And what difference would it make if the children were in a children's home or child-abuse shelter rather than in a homeless family? Since there are no "chapter-and-verse" regulations to be followed, we are left to our own judgment which may not always be the best.

In previous lessons I have downplayed the use of most of our collected money to buy buildings and pay professional ministers. There is no precedent or pattern in the Scriptures of congregations buying property or paying someone to serve their spiritual

needs (except for an elder who might devote his full time to ministry, 1 Timothy 5:17-18). I do not declare it to be a violation of God's design, but it may come under the heading of poor wisdom. Maybe it is better in your congregation, but to my knowledge, congregations have usually given no more than 5% of their income to help those in need. The 95% is used to sustain an organized system which includes paying others to do the work of the individuals. Now tell me, honestly, is that a wise use of what God has entrusted us with? I know, there are all sorts of rationalizations, but can you not see that something is grossly out of proportion in such a practice?

We have widely accepted this common practice. A man who is not an elder, pastor, or shepherd, is engaged to serve/minister as a surrogate elder, pastor, and shepherd in tending and feeding the flock. He is provided money for living quarters or a building is bought in which he and his family live, eat, sleep, socialize, play, worship, and carry on the normal activities of life. All this is paid from the church collections even though the hiring of such a congregational servant and purchase of property are without instruction or precedent in the Scriptures. Evangelists are to be supported but the minister/servant is not except as noted above. We have accepted such practices following our best judgment rather than laws and directives. If we may do these things, where do you draw the line and close the door on what collected money may be used for?

As much as we deplore the outlandish teachings and cultish practices of the Mormons, we can learn some lessons from them. On the local level, they have no paid professionals. They do build meeting houses but not every mile or so across town. One building near us in Beaverton was used by five stakes/congregations, each having its own scheduled time to use it. At the same time, our people passed buildings of the Church of Christ and drove miles to meet with others of their same scruples. Even five groups with different scruples should be able to use the same building at appointed times. That would save 80% on cost and maintenance of real estate and allow it be used more than the usual five hours per week. To skeptics of such a plan, let it be noted that the Mormons may be the fastest growing group in America.

Five signs on the same property identifying each diverse group with its meeting schedule and program might be sobering enough to cause attendees to seek true unity! And if they practiced mutual ministry, the unity might be reached much quicker because of having no professionals trained in the promotion and defense of their sectarian slants. Just think of it – no paid personnel to support and building costs cut 80% -- we would have money to do what God had in mind for us, that is, to spread the gospel and help our fellowmen. But I am just dreaming! Or is it that we are so far off course that it seems like a dream?

It would be a fanciful dream to think that the pattern followed by most evangelical churches in our country could and would make that big change in one generation, but the house-churches and the home groups developed in our churches is a baby-step in that direction. The days are long past when most of our society was illiterate so as to need the highly schooled to spoon-feed us. That need caused assemblies to be built around a public discourse for purpose of instruction. I recall that in my earlier years we often spoke of "going to preaching" and the collection was called "paying the preacher." Even

though the monologue is one of the least effective forms of communication, we still depend upon that antiquated method for a major part of our teaching.

The printing press opened new doors for teaching but literacy necessary for its effectiveness developed slowly. Then came postal service, recordings, radio, films, and television. Now we have computers and the internet that can turn the world into one classroom with learners involved world-wide at the same time. It is no longer necessary to leave home in order to obtain information or an education. Our young children eagerly operate this method of communication. Public education is beginning to utilize this fantastic tool. Some of us in religion have taken small steps in outreach through higher technology. Does not wisdom demand that churches develop educational programs adapted to the various needs of persons in their communities and around the world?

Such electronic methods can be much more thorough for the willing student than our class systems in our congregations with limited time and irregular attendance. Educators with spirituality could develop educational material covering all spiritual needs for continued distribution. Such a method would require only a small fraction of the financial outlay. I can offer some testimony here. Even as an unknown with limited educational credentials, abilities, and personal appeal, as I readily admit, my website <www.freedomring.org> has received 3,206,727 hits in the last twelve months.

Technical communication is less personal, so it cannot fulfill all our needs. Gatherings with others for mutual building of moral, stimulation, and bonding would still be important but they would not demand that all in the area meet at the same time or three times weekly as our tradition has tended to make into law. This could be provided by house groups and occasional area or city-wide gatherings in public buildings.

All of this is being tied in this essay to the matter of wise use of the resources God puts into our trust. These changes could drastically increase the amount both individuals and churches would be able to use for evangelism and serving others, both of which are our spiritual worship/service.

More next week? []

(Cecil Hook; September 2004)

Talkin' Texas: The worst natural disaster in U.S. history was in 1900 caused by a hurricane in which over 8000 lives were lost on Galveston Island.