

WHY ASSEMBLE? No. 5

As collection baskets were about to be passed in the assembly, countless times I have heard some statement like this: “We have been commanded to lay by in store as we have been prospered each first day of the week, so now we give back a portion of what God has blessed us with to be used in his work.” If that is true, then at least one of the purposes of our assembling is to give money into a church treasury. You are not going to be surprised if I question the accuracy of such statements, are you?

This conception has been based on Paul’s instruction to Corinthian believers. *“Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I have given order in the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. On the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store, as God has prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come”* (1 Cor. 16:1-2 KJV). From this well-worn and abused proof-text our people, in all sincerity, have contended that giving of money is commanded as a necessary part of worship on the first day of the week and that it is to be collected only on that day.

Sometimes I have offered some prodding questions to persons holding those convictions which probably did nothing to endear myself to them. Since each person is to do this as worship, can the husband and father give for the wife and children? Could a contribution check be mailed in, knowing that it would not be delivered on Sunday? When is the “act of worship” done? When the check is written out on Saturday evening? When is it dropped in the basket? Is dropping in a basket laying by in store? I can remember when persons took their contribution to the “communion table” and laid it on the table! Only some would let their kids do it for them. Who are those saints to whom you give each week? And when does Paul come around to pick up what is stored up for the saints?

Am I being light and frivolous? If Paul was laying down a law to apply to everyone, those questions would need to be answered. Law is exact and must be fulfilled exactly. Laboring under the concept of law has made hair-splitters and church-splitters of the sincerest of people.

Paul was urging those disciples in Galatia and Corinth to make a loving gift to the hurting Jewish brethren in Judea who had been so reluctant to accept Gentiles as brothers. This was a one-time collection. It was not asked of you or me. There is no indication that it was meant for the Corinthians on a sustained basis. Paul, along with others, later delivered this gift of love to Jerusalem. The case is closed.

But it sets a pattern that collections should be made on the first day of the week, you may contend. By what rule of consistency may you pick out one detail of the account and make a law of it for all people of all times while ignoring the other details? Must all collections be for the suffering saints in Judea? Are we following the pattern when we take collections to build a building or to pave a parking lot or to hire a preacher?

The text says, *“let every one of you lay by him in store.”* That cannot be made to mean “let every one of you give money to store in a church treasury and let the church store it up.” The RSV states it more clearly: *“each of you is to put something aside and store it up.”* That is individual action. Does it suggest that they were to put money aside in the assembly then take it home to store up? There is nothing that connects it with an assembly. On the contrary, the whole context argues against it.

In the KJV, the word “day” is italicized indicating that the word is not in the Greek text but was supplied by the translators. We can rightly infer nothing more than that Paul was exhorting the individuals to be reminded to do this as one work week ended and the next began. There is nothing in the Scriptures that indicates that disciples met every first day of the week. It is assuredly all right for us to meet and give money each Sunday but it is all wrong to make a law demanding it.

Having said all the above, we approach the saddest aspect of that legalistic concept. It has tended to segment our lives into the sacred and the secular. Simply stated: What is put in the collection is the Lord’s money; the balance is my money! Putting money into the treasury is worship; buying clothing for my child is not. The Lord’s money can be spent only on certain “spiritual” things (like church buildings which are not mentioned in the Scriptures!); my money can be spent on anything I want (except for immoral purposes, of course). Worship is done in an assembly; home life is secular. We return a portion of what God has given us; our whole life is not a living worship/sacrifice/service.

Notice that Paul did not bind the legal tithe of Moses or demand that the “Lord’s portion” be “the first and the best,” as preachers often insist. He urged giving according to prosperity. If a man has not prospered, it is next to criminal to demand that he must give when it deprives his family. If you cannot help your aged parents with the health care they need because you give so much, you are described by Jesus as a hypocrite who nullifies God’s law in Matthew 15:3-9 and Mark 7:5-13. God had told them to honor father and mother but their tradition had allowed them to tell their needy parents that they could not help them because they had given their money to God.

Your money is “given to God” more assuredly when you use it to help the needs of others than when you give it to support a system of religion. God is more concerned with the needs of individuals than with organized religion. Our text supports that truth.

What can money from the church treasury be used for? No mention is made of a church treasury in the Scriptures. The body of believers may collect and use money for any worthy cause they agree upon. Whether they make the agreement and collect the money in an assembly, at the park, or by telephone and mail makes no difference. It is all the Lord’s money and he leaves it to us as his stewards to use it according to our best judgment. There is no clear example of taking a collection in an assembly.

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(Cecil Hook; September 2003) []