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Benevolence & The Lord's Church

In the Bible-believing world there are a number of issues that divide various groups from those who strive to practice only what the New Testament teaches. Subjects such as baptism, miracles, gifts of the Holy Spirit and other things many times create an impasse when talking to people. In the Lord's church there have been a number of issues that have divided the brotherhood over the years and continue to do so. One of the most controversial is the subject of institutionalism. There are congregations who support the idea that the church has a responsibility to not only teach the Gospel but must also answer the physical and financial needs of everyone that we can. Based on that, there are churches who have joined together to support orphan homes, widows homes and other things. Those who oppose using the treasury of the church to accomplish these things are accused of being hateful, unloving and uncaring. The debate becomes heated very easily as discussions arise. Over the years I have dealt with a number of individuals who saw the mission of the church as one of relieving the poverty and hunger of those who are afflicted as well as providing for a number of other needs as well. But is that the mission of the church, and do the scriptures teach this?

As with any other question or issue the only way to answer it is to look at what is stated in the New Testament, study examples that we have and then draw conclusions. I will address some of the things that I usually hear regarding this and then will provide some history behind the controversy and why I believe church benevolence is practiced unscripturally by a number of individuals and churches who support it.

In the first article in this series I reviewed the nature of the church. The church while having an organization, is not an organization. I defined the church as the collection of those who have been saved through faith and obedience. I then defined the work of the church as demonstrated by three areas which are edification, evangelism and benevolence. The church meets collectively on the first day of the week to remember the Lord's death, burial and resurrection, sing songs of praise, preach or teach the members, pray together and lay by in store. This was covered in the last article on the work of the church. The last item that I didn't cover was that of benevolence. Let's take a look at how benevolence in the early church was demonstrated and the recipients.

Benevolence in the first century

After Pentecost the church began to grow rapidly. Luke tells us that as individuals were converted who had needs that were not being met, they received what was needed from other Christians. "***And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.***" (Acts 2.44-45). We see this again a short time later. "***Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.***" (Acts 4.34-35).

Moving forward in time we see that there was a need for relief for Christians in Jerusalem. A collection was being raised from among congregations outside Judea and Paul was planning on taking that to the elders and brethren in Jerusalem himself. To that end he wrote to the Corinthians, "***Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.***" (1 Cor 16.1-2). This passage provides us with the authority to maintain a collection, or treasury, to meet the needs of the saints and pro-



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vide for the work of the church. Paul later reminds the Corinthians of this need in his second letter. ***“For as touching the ministering to the saints, it is superfluous for me to write to you:... ut this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”*** (2 Cor 9.1, 6-7). Note that Paul states that this was for ***“ministering to the saints”***.

Before continuing I want to note the characteristics of what was being done:

1. Money and other items were being collected
2. The collection in each case was for relief of needy saints
3. The collection was done locally in each congregation
4. The collection, was to be delivered to the elders in Jerusalem by Paul
5. The elders would then distribute this to those who needed it
5. There is no indication that anyone other than Christians were given assistance

As we read the instructions given in the New Testament we find that there are also some limits placed on benevolence from the church's treasury. Paul's instructions to Timothy addresses the matter of relieving widows and defines those who could be assisted by the church. ***“Honour widows that are widows indeed. But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God. Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day. ... Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work.”*** (1 Tim 5.3-5, 9-10). Carefully note what is being stated here.

Widows were not to be considered for support if they had any family that could care for them. Paul states, ***“If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed.”*** (1 Tim 5.16). Looking at all of these statements we find that widows could not be supported by the church under the age of sixty, they had to have a history of being faithful and doing good and were thus defined as widows indeed. If on the other hand there were family members who were able to provide care, including extended family, they were to do so. Why? So the church was not burdened or charged with this task.

The church was established by Christ as the beacon of hope and vehicle of salvation to reach the world. Paul refers to the church as the ***“pillar and ground of the truth”*** (1 Tim 3.15). Remember I stated that the church was defined as the collection of those who have been saved by faith and obedience. The church is charged to continue faithfully in order to edify the saints and teach others. Along the way we find that individual Christians in the church shared what they had with those who were in need and later we find authorization to provide for the ongoing needs of the church including needy saints.

In our day and time the idea has arisen that we need to provide for the physical needs of others and some



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contend that this is necessary in order to reach the lost. I have heard some say that “you can’t convert someone on an empty stomach” to reinforce this idea. But are there examples of this in the New Testament? I believe the answer to this is no. However, when I respond like that someone usually draws on the example of Christ feeding the multitudes during his time on Earth. If we take a closer look at this we find something other than justification for turning the church into a social action agency.

Arguments drawn from the ministry of Christ & the early church

On a number of occasions I have encountered those who teach the social gospel and use events in the life of Christ as support for their ideas. Do these events teach that? Let’s examine them and see.

In Matthew chapter fourteen, after hearing that John the baptizer had been beheaded, Christ went into a “*desert place apart*” (Matt 14.1-13). When the people heard that Christ had done this they followed him. Matthew tells us, “*And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick.*” (Matt 14.14). As evening drew on Jesus disciples encouraged him to send the multitudes away so they could buy food (Matt 14.15). Christ directed his disciples to give them something to eat to which they responded they only had fives loaves and two fishes (Matt 14.17). Most of us know the story; using these few loaves and the two fishes Christ performed a miracle feeding five thousand men as well as the women and children that were with them.

On another occasion Christ went up into a mountain near the sea of Galilee. Matthew records that once again great multitudes came to him bringing those who were lame, blind and suffering in a variety of ways. As they presented these individuals to the Lord, he healed them (Matt 15.29-30). We see that Jesus called his disciples to him and expressed compassion on the multitudes who had remained with him for three days and had nothing to eat. Christ also stated he would not send them away “*fasting lest they faint in the way.*” (Matt 15.32). Most of us know this story as well. The disciples had seven loaves and “*a few little fishes*” (Matt 15.34). At this time four thousand men as well as the women and children that accompanied them were fed (Matt 15.35-38) collecting seven baskets full of pieces after the meal was done.

These events are also recorded in Mark chapters 6 and 8. Luke records the first of these events in chapter 9, and John records the first event in chapter 6. Now we need to note some things about these events and see if we can find the justification or support for the social gospel.

First, in both of these events Christ did not ask anyone to join him. The Gospels record times when Jesus went to be on his own to commune with the father. On some of these occasions the multitudes followed him. In neither of these events did Christ solicit anyone to come with him with the exception of his disciples and there is no indication that the multitudes were assured beforehand they would be fed.

Second. Christ performed a miracle that was beyond question. As we study the New Testament we find that the miracles performed by Christ were to confirm that he was the son of God and the word he spoke was truth. The miracles also fulfilled prophecy that described the Messiah as being one who would heal the sick and cause the blind



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to see. These things were noted as being observed by Nicodemus in John 3. Christ had come for two reasons. The primary reason was to save all of mankind by offering the only sacrifice capable of reconciling man with God. The second was to preach the word and prepare the people for the kingdom which was established on the day of Pentecost.

One of the most important things that stands out for me is what happens after these events. The multitudes continued to look for Christ who had gone away alone. When the people found Jesus and questioned him he stated, ***“Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.” (John 6.26).***

Based on these events and Christ's statements we can learn a few things.

1. Christ did not set out to feed the multitudes and did not announce that to them
2. Christ only fed the multitudes as a necessity because he had compassion on them
3. Christ used this event to demonstrate the power of God and confirm who he was
4. Christ rebuked the multitude because they desired the “loaves” and not necessarily the truth

We can also make additional notes of interest when someone tries to use these events to justify the social gospel.

1. There are no examples of Christ instructing his disciples to invite the multitudes to feed them
2. There are no examples of Christ commanding to make provision for the needs of the poor etc.
3. The multitudes were already in a covenant relationship with God - not foreigners / outsiders
4. The church had not been established
5. There are no examples, commands or inferences to note that this was done by the early church

Preserving the context of these accounts and the absence of instruction later, we must dismiss the argument in favor of the social gospel as being inappropriate. On one occasion, as Judas rebuked the woman for anointing Christ's feet with the costly ointment the Lord stated, ***“For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.” (Matt 26.11).*** If this had been something that Jesus thought should be done I believe he would have stated so.

Another argument offered to support the social gospel is the statement made to the rich young ruler who came to Christ asking what he should do to have eternal life (Matt 19.16). When the man approached Christ we are told that the Lord loved him (Mark 10.21) and told him ***“If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.” (Matt 19.21).*** We're told when the man heard this he ***“went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.” (Matt 19.22).*** Although some may be tempted to use this to teach that we have a responsibility to provide for the poor from the church treasury let's take a closer look at what we can learn from this.

1. The young man was a Jew and therefore in a covenant relationship with God
2. He was a good man who had observed the law
3. His character was such that Jesus loved him
4. Christ told him to sell what had, give to the poor and follow him resulting in the man leaving



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5. Christ was not addressing the issue of benevolence - he confronted the obstacle in this man's life
6. This man's possessions were standing between him and the Lord

To support the last point note what Christ told his disciples after the man left. ***"Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."*** (Matt 19.23-24). Christ was addressing the fact that this man loved his stuff more than he loved God. He was in the presence of the son of God and turned away because he was more attached to the physical than the spiritual.

Another example that provides some insight is found in the book of Acts. In chapter 3 as Peter and John go up to the temple, a lame man asks them for alms. When Peter looked at him the man was sure that he was going to receive something. Note what happens. ***"And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us. And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them. Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk. And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God."*** (Acts 3.4-8).

If benevolence, as is often advocated today, is a primary focus of the church, then why did Peter and John, two apostles and leaders of the church, not provide for this man but instead healed him? And why did they heal him? The answer to these questions I believe is simple. The primary work of Peter, John and other Christians was to teach the Gospel. The lame man provided an occasion to demonstrate the power of God which resulted in drawing attention to Peter and John as this man praised the Lord. The intent here was to teach and lead others to the Gospel and it was done without anyone receiving a monetary gift. It seems to me that if the work of relieving the poor was a primary work of the church then Peter and John would have addressed this need and provided for the man. But we don't see that taking place.

Another passage often used to support the social gospel is found in the book of James. We have to understand the nature of the book of James and set the context first. The book is written to Christians who have placed too much emphasis on their own standing socially and financially and have exercised bad attitudes toward members of the church. James addresses many flaws throughout the book including arrogance and prejudice. One of the most significant aspects of the context of the book is that it is **not written to a congregation**, but addresses **individual** Christians. That is significant and I'll explain why in a moment.

James addresses the attitude of some Christians toward others that was ungodly. ***"My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons."*** (Jas 2.1). James then goes on to address their attitudes toward those who don't dress or look that well or are poor. James then confronts this attitude stating, ***"But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called? If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well..."*** (James 2.6-8). Under the law of Moses they were to provide for the poor. Those who had land were to leave some of their crop in the field for those who were without to glean it and be fed. In this instance James is reminding them of the fact that they knew that this attitude was wrong. He then



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goes on to address their lack of love stating, *“If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.”* (Jas 2.14-17).

This passage is frequently quoted to demonstrate the belief that the church has a responsibility to carry out benevolent work for all people and to fail to do so violates God's will. We can see that this is incorrect when we examine it closer. Notice who James identifies as being naked and without food - *“a brother or sister”*. The brother or sister referred to here is not a Jew or a fellow human being. The book is written to Christians and addresses their attitudes toward their fellow Christians. This passage is used as proof that we are to use the resources of the Lord's church to perform benevolent works for anyone that has need, **but that conclusion violates the context of the book and does not establish scriptural support for the practice.** To use this passage to establish authority for orphanages, food pantries, widows homes or any other relief effort for Christians or unbelievers is not appropriate. The address of the book is to Christians who had a Jewish background - not congregations. It therefore addresses **individual** behavior not the work of the **church**. But that leads to another argument in favor of the social gospel - that whatever the individual can do, the church can do. We can easily dispel that by looking at the scriptures.

The individual and the congregation

The argument that whatever the individual Christian can do the church can do as well is simply an attempt to justify something for which there is no scriptural authority. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth to address improper and sinful attitudes and practices by the group and in doing so makes a distinction between what an individual has the ability and right to do and what the church is to observe in their work and worship. After addressing problems with their observance of the Lord's supper Paul provides very clear direction. Speaking of their observance Paul states, *“When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not.”* (1 Cor 11.20-22). There's a wealth of information in this passage so let's take a look at it closely.

The very first thing is that there is a misunderstanding of the Lord's supper and the observation is wrong. The Corinthians were treating it as a meal which may have been the result of pagan influences in which food was offered to the gods. Note Paul's rebuke - *“What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?”* this immediately **draws a line between the actions of the individual and the church as a group.** It draws a line between the what was to be done in worship and what could take place in their homes - namely a meal. Finally the fact that this abuse was occurring meant they were expressing an inappropriate attitude toward those who *“have not”*. In short, the worship including the communion was a time in which Christians are to gather together, separate themselves from the activities of their individual lives and engage in worship together in a spiritual frame of mind.

If the scriptures taught the social gospel then I would have to ask why Paul didn't give detailed instruction for their kitchen to provide for those who didn't have anything. He does not. The letter however goes into great detail on almost every aspect of worship, attitudes of the members and their overall conduct. There is nothing stated



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about any social or community action or outreach. Nor are there any other passages that teach that. This passage also prohibits the church from engaging in work of a social nature - the church is a spiritual body that uplifts its members by means of teaching and worshiping together.

The argument for expediency

Those who teach the social gospel believe in doing wonderful things, and they do. However in accomplishing their "mission" there is a realization that the problems of poverty, hunger, homelessness and other things are greater than a single congregation can address. Over the years that problem has been solved by a number of structural changes to the church's work and organization to better perform these tasks. Sponsoring churches, missionary societies, global outreach programs and other things have been launched in the name of Christ as the work of the church. There are a few fundamental problems with this thinking however in addition to the lack of scriptural authority that I've discussed above.

First is the belief that souls cannot be reached if their needs are not met. Reviewing the work of the early church I don't find that idea expressed anywhere. To the contrary. I find that the Gospel was taught and souls saved in spite of the financial standing of the members. As noted in Christ's rebuke noted above after feeding the multitude, there are many who will give lip service to the church to gain access to services offered and never develop an honest attitude toward the word of God.

Second is the belief that as an expedient the resources of multiple congregations can be pooled to better perform the work of the church. For one thing this violates the autonomy of the local congregation. It makes an eldership of one congregation overseers over other members in other places. This is how the apostasy began that eventually turned into the Catholic church. It violates scriptural authority and sends the message that humans have a better idea than God when it comes to how the church should be organized and function.

This type of thinking also encourages many to delegate their personal involvement in evangelism and benevolence to others. Writing a check and sending it to another congregation to sponsor their work is a lazy and impersonal way to accomplish the tasks that we have been commanded to do. Accountability is also in question as well since we may not know the individuals we're supporting or what they're really doing and believing. Blind trust is not something we can see in the New Testament and there is no delegation of personal responsibility.

Another problem related to this is that the eldership in one congregation delegates their responsibility of feeding the flock to another eldership in another place. As I stated about individual responsibility there is no accountability in this case. This also violates the fact that elders in one congregation are to shepherd the flock they are part of and no one else.

These attitudes suggest that the Gospel isn't powerful enough and that the church is deficient until we



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improve the way things are done. Another attitude that surfaces is a focus on numbers and the magnitude of accomplishments. This is the same thing that denominational bodies do complimenting themselves for all the good work. I'm reminded of what Christ said to his disciples when he spoke of the judgment. "***Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.***" (Matt 7.22-23). I like to remind people that sin and death entered the world when two people decided to eat a piece of fruit and Ananias and Saphira died because they "fibbed" while doing something good.

Alterations to the work and structure of the church violate scriptural authority. John sums this up very well when he states, "***Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.***" (2 John 9). Although much good might seem to be done, if its accomplished in unscriptural ways then where is the good. Limits imposed by the authority of the scriptures have to be respected and others will know when they are not. Others will undoubtedly be influenced by this way of thinking and will eventually lead to other violations of scriptural authority.

When I bring up these points the reaction is generally pretty negative. Folks who uphold the doctrine and limits of the scriptures are sometimes called "antis" because we stand against these variations that are not condoned in the Bible. Often folks will accuse us of not caring about others or that we're selfish and don't want to spend any money etc. But if the work of the church is not the work of benevolence that is practiced by some then what should the attitude of Christians be?

Benevolence in the life of the Christian

As I've shown in the discussion above, the early church engaged in limited benevolence to other Christians. Paul provides limits on supporting widows and does this so that the church is not "***charged***" or burdened. Beyond the work outlined above what is the attitude of the individual to be?

Paul states, "***And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.***" (Gal 6.9-10). The letter written to the Galatians is written to individual Christians. Most of the book deals with questions about the law and deals with false teachers and other practices. In this passage the apostle reminds us that as children of God we need to be loving. Those who develop that attitude will want to do what they can for others and will take advantage of opportunities as we have the ability. In that way individuals are seen as living in the way that God and Christ meant for us to. By the efforts of individuals others may be led to accept the Gospel through the examples we can provide. Although we may not have the numbers that other churches do, or the reach that some have, we need to concentrate on the Gospel and practice it without change. Individual Christians have the freedom to support secular relief efforts, charitable foundations and public agencies that work with the poor and provide services to those in need. A follower of God will seek to do all the good they can thanking God for the ability we have to do it. This is far too simple for many who have adopted more liberal attitudes but it is scriptural and will not violate the teachings of the New Testament and will be acceptable to God.

This is a highly summarized discussion of the subject. I have attempted to show what the Bible teaches



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without dealing with every aspect of the problem as set forth by those who have left scriptural authority behind. I encourage everyone to search the scriptures and examine these things so that we can be united in the faith.

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