

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Christian Culture: Regard for the Ministry

Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward. (1Timothy 5:17-18)

Within the Christian community some discussion exists regarding this word elder. Does it refer to ministers or pastors exclusively, or does it refer to respected men who have earned a reputation for maturity in their faith, something of a "Board of Directors" for the church? In some denominations the title is viewed in the broader sense, and the pastor automatically sits as a member of this body or board. Thus the title includes the pastor, but applies to others as well. Given the fact that Paul specifically refers to elders who labor in the word and doctrine, and that he advocates the church's financial support of the man in the position, it is my belief that the title in this lesson refers to the minister and/or pastor of the church.

This passage includes a number of interesting issues for our consideration. How do you evaluate a minister's "rule"? Who rules well? How do you evaluate one man's quality of "rule" or leadership compared with another's? How do you credit "double honor" to the man who rules well? The passage raises all of these questions, but doesn't fully answer them, does it?

Another fascinating issue in the passage appears in Paul's use of two Scriptural citations, both of which he calls "Scripture." The first reference appears in Deuteronomy 25:4. The second reference appears in two passages from the gospels, New Testament letters, not Old Testament. The words appear in Matthew 10:10 and in Luke 10:7. We must not overlook that Paul equated Moses' Old Testament writings in Deuteronomy with the Holy Spirit's recent inspiration of Matthew and Luke in their writing of the gospels. Paul considered one passage no less "Scripture" than the other. For the New Testament church and ministry, both Old and New Testament writings are to be highly respected and received as "Scripture," as holy writings given by God for the instruction of His people.

Over a lifetime of observation I have seen ministers who refused to give their full time to ministry. For them ministry was something of a glorified "holy hobby." Sadly, the churches where they served often drifted into thinking of their faith in similar terms. I have also observed men who refused to serve any church that would not support them full-time. Some of these men labored sufficiently to deserve a church's full-time support. Others seemed almost to coast along, appearing to think that their position deserved full support, whether they worked at it or not. My personal experience falls between these two rather extreme perspectives. I have served smaller churches whose numerical size did not reasonably allow them to provide full-time support to their pastor. Notwithstanding I have lived with the conviction that Scripture clearly teaches that a pastor should devote his full time to his ministry and church. This situation has often been a source of significant tension in my personal life and ministry. To walk away from the small church almost surely predicts its demise. To stay almost surely requires some kind of secular work for the pastor.

Our passage imposes requirements both on the church and on its pastor. To the pastor it emphasizes that he works sufficiently to receive the support. He is the ox who treads out the grain. He is to be fed by his own labor, not by mere position. Interestingly, the word translated ministry in the New Testament is reported by some New Testament linguistic scholars to have originally meant "working in the dust." The idea was that the man works so hard and so consistently that he stirs up a dust in the field, but he continues working just as hard in the dust as at the beginning of the day. When Paul introduced the qualifications for the ministry earlier in this letter, he prefaced the position with the fact that the man "...desireth a good work."

He doesn't merely desire the position, but the work. A man who seeks the position must demonstrate the commitment to the work to receive the support that Paul describes. A minister should avoid pleading his title or position for honor. Instead he should invest his energy in working the work of the position.

The weight of the passage on the church appears in the fact that Paul does not make this support optional. He urges it with the weight of Scripture's *command*. A church with a vision for the future should be a church with this goal firmly and clearly in its sights. In many cases giving churches that are small may need only to grow in numbers to have sufficient resources. If this is the case, they should make this growth a matter of personal prayer—and of personal evangelistic effort. If a church focuses only on growth in numbers, it has missed the mark, as is the case with many of the “church growth” movement folks in our time. However, the New Testament book of Acts clearly draws a parallel between growth in faith and growth in numbers. One seldom occurs without the other. If we accept the model of Acts, a church that is diminishing in numbers is not a strong church in the faith. Traditionally we have lamented faithful, godly people who comprise a dying church with an inexcusable misinterpretation of the Matthew 18 passage regarding “Where two or three” gather in Jesus’ name. The context of this verse has to do with interpersonal offenses, not with the public gathering and spiritual health of the church body. Can we overlook the obvious? *A dying church is not a faithful church.*

We strongly support the doctrines of grace without compromise by references to such passages as Ephesians 2:10. The reference to our being created in Christ Jesus to good works before ordained of God is altogether valid and clearly instructive to these doctrines. Our position in Christ relates to a spiritual creation, not to our personal self-generated evolution. However, Paul uses precisely the same word in reference to the church’s support of the ministry (1 Corinthians 9:14). We cannot reasonably compromise one tenet any more than the other. Thus a church’s support of a full-time ministry is not a desirable option for Paul, but a necessity, a command.

Occasionally our people have fiercely opposed the idea of a “salaried” ministry. Perhaps we overstate the Biblical position. The two passages that Paul cited use the term “hire” and “meat.” And Paul interpreted them as

“reward.” The Greek word translated “reward” in this passage literally means “dues paid for work, wages.”

There is indeed a Biblical balance that we must strive to honor in this sensitive area of teaching. On one hand we must never appear to compromise Biblical teaching. The church that does so loses the blessing intended by obedience to this command. On the other hand we must not neglect small churches that simply do not have the fiscal resources to fund a full-time pastor. If we do so, we fail the New Testament example in which Paul himself worked at making and selling tents, paid the rent, and taught all who would come to him for teaching. We cannot doubt that he believed in, and was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write, about a full-time funded ministry. Yet he willingly worked personally to advance the kingdom of God through his own secular work.

The popular reputation of many public ministries today, particularly television ministries, has shamed Christianity’s honorable and unselfish ministries. Men who rob widows while living in lavish personal abundance are to be shamed and rejected, not honored. However, their excesses should not drive any conscientious church or minister away from a devoted effort, and the necessary teaching that brings about a full-time ministry in local churches.

It is my view—as well as that of many other more informed and scholarly minds—that far more than financial support is involved in this idea of giving “double honor” to those men who labor in the gospel. The man in the office should work so hard and so honorably that he will command compelling respect from the people who know him and serve under his teaching and ministry. I reject the idea that a church should provide such support for anyone other than a man whom they have seen living up to the respect that justifies both the honor and the support that Paul describes in this passage.

It would be an informative exercise for the members of a church to devote their minds and conversation during a potluck meal or other free time in their gathering to compiling a list of things that a full-time pastor might do in their church. It might encourage them to work harder for the idea as well as encouraging their pastor to work along with them. A successful full-time ministry requires an adjustment in the church’s thinking and conduct that is as dramatic as that required by the minister himself to shift from “bi-vocational” part-time to full-time ministry. May we follow the Word in all things.

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