

HIRELING OR SERVANT?

BIBLICAL OBSERVATIONS ON SUSTAINING THE PASTOR

by: Rev. David Bostrom, © 2003

Most pastors today are regarded as employees of the church that they serve. This is because most pastors are hired by churches in order to fulfill a particular job description, much as is done in the business world. The expectations for this job, however, may or may not be consistent with the duties that the Bible requires a pastor to perform. When they are not, the expectations of the employer (in this case, the church) can easily override the actual instructions given by God to both the pastor and the church in His Word. In this situation also, a pastor is more susceptible to compromise with any unbiblical expectations of his employer lest he lose his job.

Approaching the pastor as an employee, therefore, is problematic as it promotes a hireling mentality in the church. This becomes apparent in congregations when they seek to accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires (2 Tim.4:3). Many churches, for example, look not for a man who is going to faithfully expound the Scriptures and shepherd the people of God, but for one who is likely to fill the pews and assure that the church meets its budget. The hireling mentality also exists among pastors. This becomes apparent when pastors are self-interested, showing greater concern for their compensation package and the earthly security it supposedly brings than ministering to the flock they are called to serve (Jn.10:12,13).

The practice of regarding pastors as employees has not been the norm through the church's history. This classification has become common, however, especially as the majority of churches now incorporate with the State. Historically, pastors have not been considered to be employees, but bond-servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, they are slaves of Christ, not slaves to an employer or the State. (Might this be one reason why pastors traditionally have worn a clerical collar as opposed to the business suits that have become the standard uniform of evangelical and reformed pastors today? The collar signifies slave of Christ, while the business suit often signifies the status of the paid professional.).

In keeping with the view of the pastor as a servant of the Lord (as opposed to a hired professional), pastors for much of the church's history have been cared for with tithes and gifts from the people of God. This has been particularly so with non-conformist churches and others that have been more concerned with being faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ than complying with the wishes of the State. In these cases, the focus of the congregation has been the meeting of the pastor's needs, instead of maintaining a fixed level of guaranteed compensation. Following this approach, pastors for years have had their needs met through diverse gifts from their congregations. And it has been a testimony of God's faithfulness to see how He has worked in the hearts of His people to provide gifts including cash, free services, and tangible goods to sustain His servants.

Because of the current practice of treating the church as a business corporation, sustaining a minister through gifts may be considered unusual and require some getting used to for today's pastors and their congregations. Pastors will need to come to terms with not having the security of a guaranteed salary, and congregations will need to become comfortable realizing that the church does not need to operate like a modern day corporation. In both cases, however, pastors and churches can find their consciences strengthened by realizing that having a ministry function in this way is thoroughly biblical.

The way in which priests and Levites were cared for is well established in Scripture. In the book of Numbers (18:8 ff.) we are told that tithes and offerings were given to priests and Levites for their maintenance

and inheritance. In other words, the Lord's servants were cared for directly through the gifts of His people. We see that the same is to be the normal practice in the New Testament. In fact, in 1 Cor.9:13,14 the Apostle Paul draws a parallel between ministers of the temple and preachers of the gospel, declaring that as those who tended to the altar partook of the offerings, so are preachers of the gospel to get their living from the gospel. In addition to the practice of the temple and the New Testament application of it, we also find an emphasis on sustaining God's ministers through gifts as they might be given freely by the people of God. In Matthew 10:5-15 Jesus sent out the twelve with instructions to depend on worthy hearers for their support, trusting the Lord to meet their needs as they were faithful in their mission. And in Philippians 4:15-18 we learn that Paul was accustomed to being supported (at least while not tent-making) by gifts from those to whom he ministered.

It may be argued that these examples refer to the ministry of the church during times of transition, and for an established ministry in our day a regular salary for the pastor is something that we should welcome as a convenience. Nevertheless, the scriptural emphasis on a congregation's duty to meet the needs of its pastor (Gal.6:6), and the pastor's obligation to look to the Lord in faith for his sustenance (Ps.23; Phil.4:10-19) are principles that surely abide, and are better cultivated through the giving of gifts as needed than the provision of a regular salary. In fact, functioning this way is healthier for the church as a whole, because it better promotes viewing the church as the family of God, instead of a business. Unfortunately, disputes concerning the size of the pastor's compensation package are common. One way to alleviate this problem is to establish a relationship between the pastor and the church whereby the church lovingly meets the needs of the pastor through gifts. This will also serve to relieve the church of the corporate mind-set that has so tainted its witness in these days.

Supporting the work of the ministry in this way is not only healthy for the church, it is also legal. Although churches most commonly provide their pastors with a salary, they are under no legal obligation to do so. Constitutionally, they are free to care for ministers according to conscience as they seek to follow the Scriptures. Moreover, gifts themselves are legal and not taxable. The story may be different for those churches who have chosen to incorporate with the State, but this remains to be the case with unlicensed or free-churches. When a church incorporates with the State, the State is sovereign. But for the free church, it remains sovereign over its affairs under the law-word of Jesus Christ. In short, there is no law against operating the ministry through gifts, and where there is no law there is no wrongdoing (Rom.3:20; 1 Jn.4:4).

Even though the provision of gifts is a biblical and legitimate way to meet the needs of pastors, many churches will be reluctant to function in this way. This is because many church leaders today are practical Erastians. According to Erastianism, the State has the right to intervene in ecclesiastical matters. Although most ministers would consider themselves to be vocal opponents of Erastianism, they actually promote it through actions that reduce the legitimate authority of the church. This most often occurs through "passive obeisance" – the practice of yielding to the wishes of the State without thinking through whether it is right or even required to do so. One very common way this occurs is for pastors to freely allow the State to define them as employees or self-employed. This is unfortunate, because once a minister surrenders his true definition as a bond-servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, he gives up much valuable ground, and effectively weakens the authority of the church with regard to the State. Another common way that the church weakens its own God-given authority, is for church leaders to fill out certain forms or give out certain information simply because the civil government asks them to, even though they are under no biblical or legal obligation to do so.

In order to recover from this problem, the church must restore the concept of proper jurisdiction. The Bible teaches that God has ordained three institutions among men, each having its own separate jurisdiction. The family is the ministry of education (Dt.6). The church is the ministry of grace (Eph.4:11-16). And the civil government is the ministry of justice (Rom.13). Each of these institutions are charged by

God to fulfill their particular role. One institution's relationship to the other institutions is to be supportive, yet without meddling or interference. For example, the church is to exhort the state to administer justice in the community, but it is not the church's role to determine how the specifics of this duty must be accomplished. In a similar way, the State has an interest to see that children are educated before God, but parents have the authority to determine how this will be worked out in their household.

One pertinent illustration of the doctrine of jurisdiction applied is found in the book of Ezra. Upon returning to Jerusalem, Ezra set out to restore the temple service and instruct the people in the law of God. In the process, he gives us an important principal about jurisdiction. Ezra 7:24 states, "And we also inform you that it shall not be lawful to impose tax, tribute, or custom on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God." From these words we learn that there is a jurisdictional boundary between the civil rulers and the servants of the temple. Applied to our day, we might say that there is a separation between church and State, and that the church is free to function according to the Word of God without interference from the State. This freedom for the church includes the ability to determine how it will sustain its ministers and avoid classifying them as employees.

In light of what the Scriptures teach us about how the church is to sustain its pastors, and the concept of jurisdiction that God has ordained, it is appropriate for the church to consider reform in how it takes care of its ministers. Particularly in Reformed churches, we should seek to conform all of our practices to the Bible as much as it is possible. To do so, however, we must believe that God not only permits us, but also expects us to operate under the sphere of authority He has granted to us.

OBJECTIONS:

1. *Tyranny is already here. In this case we must not resist the tyrant, but seek the welfare of the community. We must not listen to Hananiah, who falsely prophesied that the tyranny was not so severe, but we must listen to Jeremiah who knew how to operate in the midst of tyranny. Applied here, we should just compensate pastors the way the civil authorities expect.*

Whether our situation precisely parallels Jeremiah's is debatable. Certainly, our present government has become tyrannical, and we should seek the good of the community where God has us. But at the same time, we must recognize that we are not under foreign rule, and do not face the same compulsion Jeremiah faced. Besides, no one is advocating resisting anything here (except the current trend of today's church toward passive obeisance). What is being said is that it is both biblical and legal for a church to reconsider how it meets the needs of its pastor. A case can be made that it is wise to avoid characterizing a minister as an employee and support him as a servant of Christ.

2. *As Christians, we are to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mt.22:21), and follow the example of Jesus who paid His taxes lest He give offense (Mt.17:25,27).*

In reality, there is no Caesar in our current circumstance. If stretched, one could argue that the law is Caesar. But even in this case, the highest law of the land, the U.S. Constitution, has been ratified by the people and provides the protection necessary for free-churches to operate according to conscience as they seek to follow the Bible. Also, we should be careful to read the whole of Mt.22:21 and be sure to render to God the things that are God's – God's ministers are His servants and not employees as the State might seek to define them.

In reference to Jesus and taxes, it must be remembered that it was a temple tax that He paid, not a Roman tax. And He only did so after rebuking Peter for his hasty response and making the point that He was really free from the tax.

- 3. When a minister receives support from his congregation, he is being compensated for a service that he provides. This support, therefore, is a salary or income and should be treated as such. After all, does not the Scripture even talk about pastors receiving wages (1 Tim.5:18)?***

The point of this portion of Scripture is that pastors should be honored by having their material needs met. But even here, note the illustration that is used to make the point. It is from the realm of agriculture. As an ox is sustained by the fields he works, so is the minister sustained by the fields he works. The level of produce from these fields will vary, and therefore the amount available for sustenance will be unpredictable. This certainly is different than an agreed upon predictable level of compensation that is characteristic of a salary, and should not be confused with it. Moreover, income is a term that applies to corporations, and should not be misapplied to individual ministers within a free church.

- 4. To treat the pastor as something other than an employee is a scam that some churches and pastors use to avoid their obligation to the civil authorities ordained by God.***

We should not automatically become suspicious of something just because it is not in keeping with an unbiblical status quo. Our concern should be whether a practice is biblical, and then legal. In this case, meeting the needs of a pastor through gifts passes both tests. When a church is free from incorporation with the State it is free to handle its affairs according to its best understanding of the Bible.

CONCLUSION:

Proverbs 18:17 teaches, "The first to plead his case seems just, until another comes and examines him." Upon first appearance, it may seem that the only legitimate way for a church to meet the needs of a pastor is through a regular agreed upon salary. But upon further examination, this is not the case. A biblical and legitimate alternative is for a congregation to support its pastor with periodic and various gifts in order to sustain him and his ministry. Such an approach may not necessarily be what the State desires for us, but we need to beware of passive obeisance and following the path of least resistance. Our theology and practice in this area should be determined by the Bible, not by what others do and expect of us.

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