

## Financing Apostolic Ministry: A Commentary on 1 Corinthians 9:1-14

A critical element in the development of the house church movement in the United States will be a change in our financial paradigm. In traditional church, money is given by church members to pay for such things as the building, salaries for the church staff, various programs, missions, etc. The house church movement offers an opportunity to reexamine Biblical values regarding the use of money for ministry.

Probably the most important single passage dealing with this topic is 1 Cor. 9:1-18. The following is a commentary on these verses with a view to discerning principles for financing ministry. This article would be best read with your Bible open to the passage under examination. (Note: Gordon Fee's commentary, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, has been particularly helpful in this study.)

**9:1-2. Paul: "You are asking if I really am an apostle. I will give you a clear answer to your question."** "With unexpected vigor Paul suddenly unleashes a torrent of rhetorical questions..." (Fee, p. 394) These questions give us a clue as to the context. Some within the Corinthians church were questioning if Paul was really an apostle. His implied answer, "Of course I am!"

**9:3-6. Paul: "I have three questions that I will ask you. Your answers will prove that I am truly an apostle."** "In a series of cascading questions Paul plays variations on a single theme: his right to their material support.... most likely his failure to take support has been used against him to call his apostolic authenticity into question." (Fee, p. 398-399) Their reasoning may have gone something like this. "Apostles are supported financially. You are not receiving financial support from us. Therefore, you are not an apostle." Paul responds by saying, in effect, "Let me review for you the rights of an apostle and ask you (rhetorically) if this doesn't apply to me."

Paul lists three rights of an apostle. The word "right" (*exousia*) carries the idea of "appropriate authority". That is, these are things that are considered appropriate for an apostle.

1. Verse 4. "Don't we have the right to food and drink?" (v. 4) Implied answer: "Of course we do!"
2. Verse 5. "Don't we have the right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? Implied answer: "Of course we do!" (Here we have a revealing glimpse into the actual financial practice of the New Testament church towards apostles.)
3. Verse 6. "Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?" "The implication is that the problem for the Corinthians is not simply that he took no support from them, but that he supported himself in the demeaning fashion of working at a trade. What kind of activity is this for one who would be an 'apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ'? Paul's point of course is that he has the right not to (work), even though he rejected it." (Fee, p. 404)

9:7-14. Paul: "In order to validate the concept of financial support for apostles beyond a shadow of a doubt, I will give you four supporting arguments. I want you to be completely convinced about this."

1. Verse 7. Arguments from everyday life.
  - "Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense?" Implied answer: "No one! And neither should apostles."
  - "Who plants a vineyard, and does not eat the fruit of it?" Implied answer: "No one! And neither should apostles."
  - "Who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?" Implied answer: "No one! And neither should apostles.""In everyday life one expects to be sustained by one's labors. So with the apostle. He should expect to be sustained from his 'produce' or 'flock' – the church owes its existence to him." (Fee, p. 405)

2. Verses 8 – 12. Argument from Scripture.

"What Christians call the Old Testament was considered the Word of God by the Jews of the NT era, so an appeal to its words is an appeal to the authority of God himself." (Fee, p. 406)

"...when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest; that is, they should fully expect to share in the material benefits of their labors. Paul thus applies the analogy of the threshing ox to yet another analogy from farming, both of which together make the point that he has the right to their material support." (Fee, p. 408-409)

Note: Verse 11 leads us to a helpful question in deciding whom we should support financially. “Who is sowing or investing spiritually into my life?”

3. Verse 13. Argument from the example of the temple.

“Both in Jewish and pagan temples the priests who served in making the sacrifices shared in the sacrificial food itself.” (Fee, p. 412)

4. Verse 14. Argument from the very words of Jesus.

Paul clinches the argument by referring to the words of Jesus Himself (Lk. 10:7, Mt. 10:10). Whereas Jesus spoke this as a proverb, Paul has raised it to the level of a command. “This is the way things are to be done regarding the financing of apostles.”

Comments on tentmaking. Martin Luther once remarked that the church is like a drunken horseman. Prop him up on one side and he falls off on the other. Nowhere is this more true than with church finance. In the traditional church environment, there have been many problems with money. Perhaps the most pervasive is that the concept of salaried church staff has resulted in perpetuating the clergy/laity divide.

As a result of reacting to the abuses, many in the house church movement are in danger of “falling off the other side”. (This would validate the principle articulated by Jim Rutz: “The pendulum never stops in the middle.”) The thinking is that if there are no full time workers and everyone is a tentmaker, we will be kept safe from the development of “house church clergy”. While this concern is understandable, this solution is both contrary to New Testament practice and is potentially a great hindrance to the work of the Kingdom.

Tentmaking: the exception to New Testament practice. As we have seen in the commentary above, both Jesus and Paul taught that the laborer is worthy of his wages. This teaching was implemented by the early church through the financial support of “the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas” (1 Cor. 9:5).

In some situations, it was necessary for the apostles to support themselves through non-ministry work (ie, tentmaking). However, this practice is clearly the exception and not the rule. Paul chose this means of financial support in Corinth (Acts 18:3, 1 Cor. 9:12, 15-18) so as not to be a hindrance to that church. In other words, the Corinthian church was so immature (1 Cor. 3:1-3) that they were unable to fulfill their normal obligation to Paul as the apostle.

However, even in Corinth Paul received at least some of his support from the church – just not the church in Corinth. “I robbed other churches, taking wages from them to serve you; and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia, they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so.” (2 Cor. 11:8-9)

In Thessalonica, Paul also chose to make an exception to the normal pattern and support himself from non-ministry work. Again, the reason was because of the immaturity of the church. In this case, the Christians were lazy and Paul realized that he needed to show them how to work. “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example; because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example.” (2 Thes. 3:7-9) The more normal and mature church is modeled by the Philippians. Even after Paul had left town, they repeatedly sent him gifts. He points out that this is not so much to his benefit (God will supply all his needs) but for their profit. (Phil. 4:15 – 19)

Tentmaking: a potential hindrance to the work of the Kingdom. While there may be occasional situations where tentmaking is necessary because of the immaturity of a particular church, the work of the Kingdom would be greatly restricted if this became the normal practice for apostles. This becomes clear when we understand the farmer’s mentality that Jesus displays in Luke 10:1-2.

In this passage, Jesus has just sent out 36 apostolic teams of two men each. While we might think that was a lot of teams for a fairly small region, Jesus’ assessment is that they are only a “few” (v. 2). So few, in fact, that He urges them to “beseech the Lord of the Harvest” to send more.

The Lord’s motivation in all of this is the harvest. The harvest is “ripe”! The time is now! As every farmer knows, when the harvest is ripe, every available man hour must be freed up to bring that harvest in.

Those that have been chosen to be apostles (sent ones) must be released to work from sun up to sun down. The idea that the majority of the workers would work all day making tents with only an hour or two at the end of the day to harvest the grain would have been appalling to the farmer. Perhaps there will be

extenuating circumstances that will require a few workers to function like this. However, reducing every apostle (church planter) to tentmaking status would cripple the harvest workforce. By overreacting to the abuse and going to the opposite extreme, the church would play into the strategy of the Enemy. Adopting the farmer's mentality: IT'S ABOUT THE HARVEST! Releasing thousands of full time apostles (skilled and gifted house church planters) is by far the best strategy for starting a million house churches in the U.S. in this decade. This can be accomplished if millions of believers come to understand the Biblical value of funding these apostolic harvesters. Instead of investing in church buildings, church programs and church staffs, believers will need to see the value of investing in those who are called to begin and nurture church planting movements. This thoroughly Biblical concept must be once again understood, taught and practiced by the church.

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