

Limited Benevolence

Many churches get involved in charitable works such as supporting orphan homes, founding hospitals, and opening the building for AA meetings.

The leadership of this congregation, however, practices “limited benevolence,” that is, limiting charity from the church treasury to brethren. Why is that?

Respect for Scripture

It is out of respect for God’s authority. God’s word teaches us through commands and examples and necessary inferences. To use the Lord’s Supper as an example, we find in the Bible direct commands: “Do this in remembrance of Me” (1 Cor. 11:24–26); we find examples: “On the first day of the week, we were gathered together to break bread” (Acts 20:6–7); and we find inferences: partaking of the Supper every first day of the week.

God also teaches through silence. There are a number of things that God has not specifically condemned, and yet does not approve, because He has already authorized a particular course of action. That is why we do not worship with instruments. God never said, “Thou shalt not worship with piano or guitar.” But in the gospel of Christ, He has only said “speaking to one another ... singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.” God authorizes singing, ruling out other methods. We respect His silence.

We do not disagree that using the church treasury to feed the hungry of the world would be a lovely thing to do, any more than we disagree that a piano would be lovely in worship, or that milk and cookies would be lovely on the Lord’s Table.

Several passages in the New Testament reveal God’s will for benevolence through command and example. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need (Acts 2:44–45; cf 6:1–3). And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them... For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need (Acts 4:32–35). And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders (Acts 11:27–30). Be devoted to one another in

brotherly love; give preference to one another ... contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality (Rom. 12:10–13). Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26).

Now concerning the collection for the saints... On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come (1 Cor. 16:1–2). I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints... For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God (2 Cor. 8:1–3; 9:12). To my knowledge, these are all the passages that mention benevolence (with two exceptions that I'll get to in a moment). It seems pretty convincing that God authorizes the church to support needy saints, but says nothing about supporting needy non-Christians.

It Shows the World that the Church is the Family of God

It is a point of righteous boasting that the church cares for its own. In Acts 4:32–35 there were surely many needy people in and around Jerusalem, but “among them,” among Christians, there were no needy people, because the church cared for them. In Acts 11:27–30, there were many hungry people in Judea, but the Gentile brethren did not send money through Barnabas to establish a corner soup kitchen, but to give relief to needy brethren.

Paul uses the children of Israel as an example of how the church treasury is to be used for benevolence. This is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality—at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality. As it is written, “He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack” (2 Cor. 8:1-15). The church ought to spread its resources around the body, one congregation's abundance being a supply for another's lack, “that there may be equality.” It's hard to see how the body of Christ, tiny by comparison, could ever bring financial justice to the world at large.

Rather, brethren ought to care for one another as a family, knowing our common participation in the kingdom of Christ, no matter how far we are separated by distance, tribe, or tongue. A hurricane may strike and leave hundreds homeless, but as God's church, we have a responsibility to house and feed our brothers and sisters. The world is watching to see how brethren behave. Let governments fail, let FEMA fail, let fire and flood insurance fail, but let the world see that with Christians “there is not a needy person among them”!

It Keeps Us from Being Tempted to Use Bait and Switch Tactics

Some would say, “let’s then use charity to evangelize!” Sponsoring a clothing drive or setting up a runaway shelter could give us a great opportunity to get people in the door and hand out literature.

But we have to be careful. Paul said his gospel mustn’t come “by way of deceit” (2 Thess. 2:3, cf Rom. 3:8). Should we bait and switch the multitudes? I want people to know I care, but when does it become confusing? (Acts 3:5-7). As has been so wisely said, “Convert a man on Coke and a hot dog, you’ll have to keep him on a Coke and a hot dog.” Only the word of Christ, often accepted in the face of persecution and difficulty, will change a man’s heart and keep it changed.

What About James 1:27 and Galatians 6:10?

If this leaves you thinking that Christians can safely ignore suffering in the world; hold on, not so fast! Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27). Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). Because of these two passages, some conservatively-minded brethren believe that it is not only permissible to support those outside the church from the treasury, but necessary. I truly understand their point.

But it seems to me that, based on the Scriptural baseline established above, there is a more consistent way of reading these two passages. That will be the subject of next week’s bulletin. -- John Guzzetta