

Full-Time Ministry—Full-Time Support

Introduction

I gladly wrote this study in response to a brother in Christ. This is a worthy subject and needs to be considered. I am aware that many people have erroneous ideas concerning this topic. May this little writing open some eyes to the truth concerning this subject.

There is only one source of truth which all Christians recognize as the divine standard—the Scriptures. What any individual “thinks” or “believes” or “feels” to be true is not important. The all important consideration is “what does God say about it?”

Does God Want His Ministers to Devote Their Full Time to That Work?

Among the people that I serve God with, most of the ministers devote only part of their time to the ministry of the word and spend the rest of their time at secular jobs. Occasionally, we find a man who, being supported by a church of the Lord Jesus Christ, devotes his full time to the ministry of the word. This situation is just the opposite of what it should be according to the word of God. The Scriptures teach, as we shall see, that the normal situation should be that a minister be in the work of the ministry full-time, but that occasionally in exceptional circumstances, a man of God may supplement his income by secular work. [I am very thankful to note that since I first wrote this article the situation has become much better. A greater percentage of ministers are able to spend more of their time in the ministry. Many more people than in years gone by believe strongly that the Bible pattern is that the congregations free their ministers' hands so that they may give themselves wholly to prayer and to the ministry of the word].

The fact that the pattern of the Bible has been reversed is responsible, in great part, for the destitute spiritual condition of many of our churches today. A cowardly ministry is responsible for this condition. Most ministers will not speak out on this subject because they know that Satan will move someone to claim that they are greedy of filthy lucre.

Scriptures Supporting the Concept of the Gospel Ministry as a Full-Time Work

There are many Scriptures on this subject that are so plain it is virtually impossible to misunderstand them. We will consider several:

1. 1 Corinthians 9:14, "Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel." This entire chapter from verse one to eighteen is talking about financial support for the minister. Verse seven says that when a man is a soldier on active duty, his nation financially supports him so that he can devote full time to the warfare. Verse nine says that even the law said that the ox that treadeth out the corn should not be muzzled. Verse ten applies this idea to human beings—specifically to ministers of the Word of God.. Verse thirteen says that in Old Testament times the priests were able to minister about the temple on a full time basis because they lived on their portion of the sacrifices which the people of God had

brought to the altar. And then we come to verse fourteen, quoted above. This verse does not say that we are to make up our own minds about the matter. It says that God has “ordained” that they which preach the gospel shall live of the gospel. That is, they should be supported financially by those to whom they minister.

The word translated “ordained” here is a very strong word. It is *diatasso*, and literally constitutes a command to ministers to live of the gospel, as the priests lived of the temple. This is the law of Christ and places an obligation on ministers and people—on the people to give, and on the ministers to be willing to be supported by the church and not from a secular occupation.

This is God’s rule! There are exceptions to this rule as we shall see later, but the rule, as a rule, remains in force. How sad it is that most of our ministers and people have lived by the exception rather than by the rule. This amounts to substituting the traditions of men for the commandments of Christ. The Lord has and will show His displeasure at this tampering with his word. (Matt. 15: 1-9).

2. 1 Timothy 5:17-18, "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."

Here in verse eighteen Paul quotes from the same Old Testament passage that he used in 1 Cor. 9: 9 concerning the ox that treaded out the corn. In both places he is speaking of the full support of the minister by the church of God. So far as the “double honour” is concerned, Paul is simply saying that a hard working minister of the gospel should be paid well. This is obvious from the context. It is also indicated by the New Testament Greek word translated “honour.” The word is *time*. The same word is translated “price” in Matt. 27: 6, 9; it is translated “prices” in Acts 4: 34; it is translated “sum” in Acts 7: 16; it is again translated “price” in 1 Cor. 6: 20, where the verse says, “ye are bought with a price.”

Only those elders who continually work hard at this work are entitled to this generous support. The word translated “labour” is *kopiao* which means “to grow weary, tired, exhausted, to labor with wearisome effort, to toil.” The specific work these men are to be laboring in is ruling (to superintend) and doctrine (teaching). If this kind of intense effort had been put into this work all along, our churches would have been much more vigorous and there would be more churches. The fault lies with cowardly or uninformed ministers who will not teach, and with covetous church members who prefer to serve mammon rather than God. The primary fault lies with the ministers, because I believe there are many of God’s people who would do better if they were taught.

3. Acts 6:4, "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

Here, the apostles, who acted in the capacity of elders or ministers of the church at Jerusalem (1 Pet. 5: 1), set the example for all time to future ministers. It is impossible for one to give himself continually to these things if his mind and energy are consumed in a secular job forty or more hours in a week. Here, in this chapter, the church at Jerusalem greatly prospered after the ministers' hands were freed to do the work to which God had called them.

4. 2 Timothy 2:4, "No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier."

The context (see verse two) shows plainly that Paul is speaking to Timothy in his capacity as a minister of the gospel. This says clearly that if a man of God wants to please his Master, he will seek to spend as much time as possible in the active service of the gospel. The minister is a soldier of God in a very special sense. One translator renders this verse as follows: "No one when engaged in military service allows himself to become involved in civilian pursuits, in order that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier."

I remember that before I became a minister of the gospel I labored at secular work. In the course of a day I could not help but be entangled somewhat with the affairs of this life. Often I would go to church weary and tired. My pastor, Hassell Wallis, was a full time minister. He had spent his entire time in prayer and in the ministry of the word. He would come to the worship service filled with holy zeal. He was able to lift up my weary soul by his messages and give me fresh hope. How thankful I was that he had not been out in the world as I had been! If he had been in the same shape I was in, he could not have helped me very much. God knew what He was doing when He ordained things this way.

5. Other Scriptures:

I have given only a sampling of the Scriptures which pertain to this subject, but the Scriptures that I have given are plain and will be sufficient for the open-minded child of God who honestly wants to do things God's way.

It is obvious that other Scriptures will not contradict the ones that have been cited, for God's word doesn't contradict itself.

Historical Evidence

Not only does Scripture advocate ministers of the gospel giving their full time to this work, and the churches supporting them as they labor, but history shows that our forefathers taught the same truth. So when we walk in this path we are truly walking in "the footsteps of the flock."

I now quote a portion of *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith*. The Philadelphia was one of the oldest Baptist associations in America. She adopted this confession which was essentially the same as the *London Baptist Confession of Faith* which was issued in 1689:

The work of pastors being constantly to attend the service of Christ in his churches, in the ministry of the word and prayer (Acts 6: 4; Heb. 13: 17) with watching for their souls, as they that must give an account to him, it is incumbent on the churches to whom they minister, not only to give them all due respect, but also to communicate to them of all (1 Tim. 5: 17, 18; Gal. 6: 6, 7) their good things, according to their ability, so as they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves (2 Tim. 2: 4) entangled in secular affairs; and may also be capable of exercising (1 Tim. 3: 2) hospitality toward others; and this is required by the (1 Cor. 9: 6-14) law of nature, and by the express order of our Lord Jesus, who hath ordained that they that preach the gospel should live of the gospel.

This is just a sample of the testimony of the history of our people. Much more of a similar nature could be produced. How encouraging that they stood where Christ and the apostles stood!

Exceptions to the Rule

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule, but the exceptions should be rare and exceptional, and not the ordinary thing! In spite of the exceptions the rule still stands.

Sometimes a congregation might be so small she simply could not support a minister full time, but he and they should work and pray towards this biblical goal. It does not take a very large congregation, if they mean business with the Lord, to support a pastor full time. If a congregation of ten families each gave ten percent of their income for the support of their pastor, he would be enabled to live on the average income of his flock. I know of one church which does not even have ten families who are supporting their pastor in full time ministerial work. This has proven to be a great blessing both to them and to him. Of course, this little group really means business with God. They do not just talk about how much they love the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ—they do something about it.

The Case of Paul

There are other exceptions to the rule. When a man does evangelistic work and is used of God to start new churches, he will have to do some secular work unless he receives support from already established churches. It is also sometimes necessary for a gospel minister to do secular work to stop the mouths of those enemies of the gospel who claim that the true gospel minister is trying to get rich off God's people. A man of God should be more than willing to work with his hands when the occasion demands it.

The example to the gentile ministry is Paul the Apostle. Paul spent most of his life in the full time ministry of the word. On one occasion, when he was under house arrest by the Roman government, he spent two whole years doing nothing but preaching in his own hired house. (Acts 28: 30-31). The only way he was even able to rent the house was with money that had been sent to him by the church at Philippi (Phil. 4: 14, 18—the Philippian letter was written by Paul while he was in prison in Rome). While Paul was at Corinth for about a year and a half, he worked only occasionally and on a part time basis. How was he able to do this? Let us hear his own words: “I robbed other churches, taking wages of them, to do you service. And when I was present with you, and wanted, I was chargeable to no man: for that which was lacking to me the brethren which came from Macedonia supplied...” (2 Cor. 11: 8, 9). This word “wages” is the same used in Luke 3: 14 where the Savior told the soldiers to be content with their wages. This language reminds one of the words used by the Lord when He sent the seventy evangelists out to preach the gospel. He said, “for the labourer is worthy of his hire.” (Luke 10: 7).

This does not mean that a minister can be bought or hired. It does not mean that he will refuse to preach unless he gets a certain amount. He must preach freely without regard to pay. He must not be a hireling. However it does mean that he is entitled to support from those to whom he ministers. He is “worthy” of this support.

Some people, being ignorant of some things in the Scriptures, teach that Paul worked at secular work constantly and that this is the example to be followed today. This simply is not true. Why would Paul teach that God had ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel, and then himself live some other way? Paul was not a hypocrite, nor was he inconsistent.

Let us examine a few places when Paul did secular work and why he did it. When he first came to Corinth, he lived with a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, and worked with them in tent making. (Acts 18: 1-3). There was not a church in Corinth as yet. Paul preached in a Jewish synagogue and his preaching divided the believers from the unbelievers. Then he and the believers left the synagogue and started a Christian church in a home. This is why Paul made tents. There was no church to support him.

After there was a church in Corinth Paul still refused to take any support from them, even though he strongly taught there that the gospel minister should be supported by the church. Why did he refuse this support? He did this to stop the mouths of the false apostles of Satan—evil men who were greedy of filthy lucre, and men who tried to ruin Paul’s reputation by saying that he was trying to get rich off God’s people. See 2 Cor. 11: 12, 13. Later, in an amazing statement, Paul begs the Corinthian saints to forgive him because he had not been dependent on them for support! He wrote, “For what is it wherein ye were inferior to other churches, except it be that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong.” (2 Cor. 12: 13).

At Ephesus Paul worked at secular work part of the time during the three year period he stayed there. He did this at first because there was no church at Ephesus. Later,

after a church was established, he continued to work at secular labor to set the example to other ministers to not be lazy. (Acts 20: 33-35).

It is certainly true there is no excuse for a minister of the gospel to be lazy. However, when a minister is laboring at prayer, and the ministry of the word (studying, preaching, counseling, etc.) he is not being lazy! People sometimes fail to understand that when a man is locked away in his study for several hours at hard study, he is not being slothful. This is exactly what God has called him to do. (1 Tim. 4: 15).

Some Difficulties Experienced by Those in the Full Time Ministry

The Bible tells us to “know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them highly in love for their work’s sake...” (1 Thess. 5: 12, 13). We need to know some of the problems that our ministers face so that we may be better able to pray for them and to hold their hands up.

One problem that a man in the full time ministry sometimes faces is criticism from those who are thoughtless or from those who actually have evil intentions. One older minister of my acquaintance has made it a constant practice of accusing those in the full time ministry of being greedy of filthy lucre. Yet this man, who is not full time, has a prosperous store and a large farm. I know of no full time ministers who are thus situated. The question arises in my mind as to who is greedy of filthy lucre? I know who actually possesses the filthy lucre!

We should never let unjust criticism of God’s faithful servants to go unanswered. We should Scripturally rebuke those who malign the servants of God. We need to be like Aquila and Priscilla who Paul said, “who for my life laid down their own necks...” (Rom. 16: 4). The servant of God who is a true soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ has enough enemies in the world, without having to endure the criticism of those who should be his best friends and strongest supporters.

Another problem faced by the full time minister is the fact that he and his family must usually live on a lower income than would be the case if he did secular work. He usually has no group hospitalization insurance or group life insurance. He usually may not have a retirement plan and may not make enough to be able to save very much toward the future. He must pay both the employer’s and the employee’s portion of the Social Security tax, as he is regarded as a self-employed person in the eyes of the law. He maintains his own car which he uses in his work and pays his own expenses.

He is expected to wear decent clothes and he must usually buy his own books (which are really the “tools of his trade.”). He is required by the Scriptures to be given to hospitality and to do this requires considerable expense.

These are not complaints. God’s true servants are in the ministry because He has called them to it and they love their Lord and the work to which He has called them.

Nevertheless, God's people should be aware of the needs of the pastors that God sends to them.

Let's Hold Their Hands Up!

On one occasion long ago God's people were fighting a common enemy. Moses was their leader. So long as he held his hand up with the rod of God in it, the armies of God's people prevailed. Moses became very tired and could not continue to hold up his arm. Aaron and Hur sat him on a stone and held his hands up. God's people had victory. (See Ex. 17: 8-13).

What a lesson for us today. No church is ever going to go further than its leaders for any length of time. How we should pray for God to send us dedicated pastors and how we should hold their hands up! We should do this by financial support, prayer, encouragement, and any other way we can find. We, too, will win our battles.

We need more people like those in Romans 16—people whom Paul called “my helpers in Jesus Christ...” In short, we need more people in love with Christ, in love with His gospel, in love with His ministers of the word.

People who do not love in word only, but people who love in deed and in truth!

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