

THE KINGDOM AT WORK: BENEVOLENCE

By Donald Townsley

Many false notions exist in the minds of Christians with reference to the work of the kingdom in the field of benevolence. The truth concerning this subject cannot be determined by sentiment or emotion; neither can we learn the truth by what we have done in the past or what we might be doing at present. The scriptures were given by inspiration of God that we might be "*thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:17 NKJV), and we must determine from them how God would have the kingdom to work in the matter of benevolence just as we would in any other matter. This is the only way we can please Him.

Let me begin by saying that much of the teaching in the New Testament concerning the subject of benevolence is directed to individual citizens of the kingdom, not to the local church. The New Testament teaches that the individual citizen has a responsibility: (1) to his own family (I Tim. 5: 4, 8, 16; Eph. 6:2); (2) to help the fatherless and widows (James 1: 27); (3) to his brethren in Christ who are in need (Matt. 25:40; I John 3:17; Rom. 12:13); (4) to assist his neighbor when he is in need (Luke 10: 25 - 37), and (5) to help his enemy in time of need (Rom. 12:20; Luke 6: 27 - 28). When we use the opportunities we have to help those who are in need the sacrifices we make are well-pleasing to God (Heb. 13:16). Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20: 35). It is by doing such work that we become Christ-like (Acts 10: 38). Our eternal destiny depends upon us doing these things (Matt. 25: 31 - 46).

God has restricted the benevolent work which the church can do. He never intended the church to undertake to meet the benevolent needs of all humanity; it could not do so if it tried! The primary work God has assigned the church is preaching the gospel to the salvation of lost souls (Luke 19:10), and if the church took on the burden of meeting the benevolent needs of society it would not be able to do that primary work. The spiritual work of preaching the gospel to save the lost took precedence over benevolence in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6: 2 - 4). It is evident from the New Testament scriptures that the benevolent work of the church was limited by divine authority: (1) churches in apostolic times were not to help saints who were too lazy to work. Paul said to the Thessalonians: "*For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat*" (2 Thess. 3:10); (2) apostolic churches did not take from families the responsibility they had to help their own needy kin (I Tim. 5:4, 8, 16); and (3) they did not help saints who had gone back into the world and were living in sin (I Tim. 5: 6, 15; 2 Thess. 3: 10 - 11). The only benevolent contribution any congregation made out of its treasury in apostolic days was to "poor saints". Let us now look at how the work of benevolence was done in New Testament times.

The first record we have in the New Testament of a local congregation engaging in benevolent work is found in Acts 2: 44 - 45: "*And all that believed were together, and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.*" From this record we can see that the Jerusalem church helped provide for believers who were in "need"; the local church ministered to the needs of believers who were destitute, and the work was done by the local church, not through a "benevolent society".

The next record we find in the New Testament is in Acts 4: 32, 34- 35. Again we see the Jerusalem church providing for believers: "*Neither was there any among them that lacked*" (verse 34). This work was under apostolic control: "*and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet*" (verse 35). The local church did this work; the apostles authorized no benevolent society through which to do it!

A problem in the Jerusalem church is the occasion for the next recorded work of congregational benevolence (Acts 6: 1 - 6). Some disciples (who were widows) were being neglected in the daily work of ministry. Within the

framework of the local congregation, seven men were selected to take care of this work; no benevolent society was formed outside the local church to do the work. We can also see from this record that preaching the gospel took precedence over benevolence: *"Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables"* (Acts 6: 2 - 4).

A dearth brought about the occasion for the next recorded incidence of congregational benevolence (Acts 11: 27 - 30). The church in Antioch of Syria sent aid to the churches in Judea that were in need (I Thess. 2:14). Here we see that one church may send relief to other churches when the receiving churches are unable to do their own work of taking care of the needy saints that are among them. The funds were sent directly, by messengers, to the elders of each church that was in need (Acts 11: 29 - 30). The funds were to enable each church to do its own work (this is the only reason we find one church sending to another church, to enable the receiving church to do its own work). There was no other organization or "sponsoring church" between the sending church (Antioch) and the receiving churches in Judea. Antioch chose Barnabas and Saul as messengers (Acts 11:30), and sent the funds directly to the elders of the local churches where the need existed. Each church then administered the relief to its own needy members under the oversight of the elders.

The next example we have is of the churches in Macedonia, Achaia and Galatia sending aid to the church in Jerusalem (I Cor. 16: 1 - 3; 2 Cor. 8 & 9; Romans 15: 25 - 32). There were saints in need in the Jerusalem church and the church was unable to supply their needs (Rom. 15: 26), so churches with an abundance supplied that need that *"there might be equality"*-- mutual freedom from want (2 Cor. 8:14). Here Paul teaches that the contributions from other churches must cease when the needs of the receiving church have been adequately supplied: *"But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality"* (2 Cor. 8:14). The contributing churches chose their own messengers (I Cor. 16: 3) and sent the aid directly to the Jerusalem church where the need was. There was no "sponsoring church" or any other human organization between the contributing churches and the receiving church; churches with an abundance (Macedonia, Achaia and Galatia) sent to a church in want (Jerusalem) to enable the receiving church (Jerusalem) to provide for its own destitute members.

The last example we have in the New Testament of congregational benevolence is found in I Timothy 5:16: *"If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed."* From this passage (and verse 4) we learn that the church is not to be charged with widows who have children or grandchildren who can relieve them (I Tim. 5:4 NKJV). The church is to relieve *"them that are widows indeed"* (I Tim. 5:5, 16). It is evident from what is said here that the "widow indeed" is a faithful saint who is destitute.

If we are honest we can determine from all the foregoing passages we have studied that only faithful saints were helped from the treasury of the local church in New Testament days: no local congregation in apostolic times ever engaged in general benevolence to the alien world.

It becomes evident from a study of the work of benevolence in apostolic days that: (1) preaching the gospel was placed before benevolence (Acts 6: 3, 4); (2) that the work of the church in benevolence was under the authority of the apostles (Acts 4: 35, 37); (3) that benevolence is a "fruit" of Christianity, not the means of propagating it. (Food and clothing were never offered by apostolic churches as a means of getting people to hear and accept the gospel. The grounds/basis for providing relief to saints was necessity/need (Rom. 12: 13; Acts 2:45); (4) that the funds were raised by each member giving (as he has prospered and according to his ability) into the treasury of the local church upon the first day of the week (Acts 11:29; I Cor. 16: 1, 2); (5) that each congregation sent its funds by its own messenger directly to the congregation that was in need without any "sponsoring church" being used (I Cor. 16: 3); (6) that when a congregation with abundance sent aid to a congregation in need the elders of the receiving church saw to the distribution of funds to its own needy members

(Acts 11:30); (7) that no apostolic church ever gave to another church that was not in need, there is no exception to this; (8) that no church every became a "sponsoring church" through which other churches cooperated in doing benevolence or any other work; and (9) that there were no human organizations built and maintained to do the work of benevolence or any other work.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that there is no Bible authority for many churches to pool their funds into the hands of a "board" that it might direct a work of general benevolence for all (or many) churches. In New Testament times each church, within its own framework, cared for its own. When one church was unable to care for its own , then other churches sent relief to the elders of the church that was in need that they might see that their own poor saints were taken care of (Acts 11; 27 - 30; I Cor. 16: 1, 2; 2 Cor. 8 and 9).

This is God's revealed plan for the work of benevolence, and we must see that we follow it if we want to be pleasing in His sight.