

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES CONCERNING THE CARE OF THE NEEDY

The care of the needy, widows and orphans, is Bible doctrine. In Deut. 15:11 we read, "*for the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.*" Psalms 146: 9 says, "*The Lord preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and widows:*" Jesus said, "*for ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good.*" (Mark 14:7). James said, "*Pure religion and undefiled before God and the father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world*" (James 1: 27). At judgment the ones on the right hand will be those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, lodged strangers, clothed the naked, visited the sick and came unto those in prison (Matt. 25: 31- 40).

In the beginning I want to stress that I know of no Christian who denies that caring for the needy is Bible doctrine. I know of no Christian who would let little orphans starve, go without clothes, or who would turn them out in the street and let them freeze to death. In fact, I know of no saint (or sinner) who hates little orphan children! Brethren, this is not the issue before churches of Christ, and men who say it is the issue are either ignorant of the issue or they are dishonest and mean.

The problem today is as it was a hundred years ago when our brethren opposed the missionary society to do the work of preaching the gospel -- they were charged with not believing in preaching the gospel to the lost! So it is today when brethren oppose benevolent societies -- they are charged with not believing in helping the needy.

In this article we want to examine what the Bible says on the subject. Only the Word of God can settle the question -- sentiment and emotion cannot! Neither can we learn what the truth is by looking at past practices -- we may have been wrong in the past!

We also need to learn what benevolence is not! Benevolence was never used in the New Testament as a means of introducing the gospel or the kingdom of God to the aliens of the world. Food and clothing were never offered by the early church as a means of getting people to hear and accept the gospel! Paul did not take a contribution of food and clothing with him from the churches when he went to Europe for the first time, and there were as many needy in Paul's day as there are today. If a man will not hear without being bribed with benevolence, he will turn away when the benevolence is discontinued. Multitudes followed the Lord for the loaves and fishes, and in John 6:26 the Lord said, "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.*" The very moment He taught something which they did not like, they "*went back*" and "*walked no more with him*" (John 6:66). Brethren, let us learn that benevolence is the fruit of Christianity, NOT the means of propagating it!

Much of the teaching in the New Testament on this subject is directed to individual Christians. In this life Christians are fitting themselves for heaven, they are "*partakers of the divine nature*" (II Pet. 1:4). No Christian is partaking of the "*divine nature*" who is not developing "*a heart of compassion*" (Col. 3: 12 ASV) and of love (II Pet. 1:7). These qualities, and others, such as "*humbleness of mind*" (Col. 3: 12), are developed in our lives only when we come in personal contact with our fellowman who needs our help, and we in turn personally supply that need. The real and everlasting good from such action is the good that we receive in developing these qualities of divine nature that are so necessary if heaven is to be our home. Paul quotes Jesus to affirm this truth; Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35). Jesus said the quality of greatness comes through our service to others (Matt. 20: 26 - 27). Any teaching that de-emphasizes the importance of the individual and his personal action and good works is not the religion of Christ, because Christ never lost sight of the needs of the individual.

The Bible teaches that individual Christians have an obligation in caring for the needy as they have ability and opportunity:

1. Each Christian has a responsibility to his own -- I Tim. 5:8:
 - (1) His widowed mother -- I Tim. 5: 4, 16
 - (2) His widowed aunt -- I Tim. 5: 4, 16
 - (3) His widowed grandmother -- I Tim. 5: 4, 16
 - (4) His old father -- Eph. 6:2 (Jesus shows in Matt. 15: 4 - 6 that the meaning of "honor" is to supply their material needs.)
 - (5) The principle of caring for one's own will also apply to other relatives such as orphaned nieces and nephews -- James 1:27.
 - (6) The principle would include brothers and sisters in the flesh -- I Tim. 5:8.
2. The individual Christian has an obligation to other Christians in need:
 - (1) If brethren are hungry, naked, sick, in prison, thirsty, or a stranger, the Lord said, "*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*" (Matt. 25:40). The brethren of Christ are Christians (Heb. 2: 11 - 12; Rom. 8: 16 - 17). (This is an individual standing before the Lord, not a congregation).
 - (2) Brother have need -- I John 3:17.
 - (3) Distributing to the necessity of saints -- Rom. 12:13.
3. The individual Christian is commanded to assist his neighbor when he is in need (Luke 10: 25 - 37).
4. He is to even help his enemy in time of need (Rom. 12:20; Luke 6: 27 - 28).
5. He is to help the fatherless and widows (James 1: 27). (In Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. 1, page 736, we have this comment to James 1:27: "*To visit...*" *James strikes a downright blow here at ministry by proxy, or by mere gifts of money. Pure and undefiled religion demands personal contact (emphasis mine - dt) with the world's sorrow: to visit the afflicted, and to visit them in their affliction.*"

There are many ways the Christian can supply the needs of those toward whom he has a responsibility. He could provide a place for the person or persons, and if necessary he could hire someone to care for them. (Children have done this many times for their parents.) He could buy services of an institution which provides such care, such as a hospital or nursing home. The Samaritan bought the services of a "host" who ran an inn (Luke 10: 35). (The Samaritan did not make a contribution to the "host", but paid him for services rendered to "take care" of the man who had been beaten.) The needy person might be able to stay in his or her own home, but need some help, money, food or clothing. Whatever is needed can be supplied by the Christian. In all of this the Christian is directly involved, shouldering his responsibility. He is blessed as well as they. He is learning sympathy, compassion, and to be less selfish. He is learning to appreciate his own blessings.

Brethren, mailing a token contribution to some human benevolent organization will never develop within you the finer qualities that God intended your personal assistance to the needy to do. After all the "blowing and hollering" by the institutional brethren about all they are doing in the field of benevolence, the bold truth of the situation ought to make them ashamed. A guest editorial in the Boles Home News, July 25, 1965, written by Charles A Shelton (a man who would be for the benevolent societies), reveals some eye-opening facts about what liberal churches of Christ are really doing. He says, "*A random sampling of 100 congregations reporting in Churches of Today produced some startling and dismaying facts. Every church in the sampling reported more than 200 members, and this was the only limitation placed on the sampling. These 100 churches reported 31,296 members and annual budgets totaling \$2,946, 146.00*" "*The total amount contributed for benevolence by these congregations for*

the calendar year 1961 was \$114,640. This amounts to the grand average of \$3.66 per year per member. The average church member contributes seven cents per week to benevolent work of all kinds, or less than the cost of a cup of coffee."

The local congregation is obligated to care for certain needy saints. There are nine passages in the New Testament dealing with the subjects of benevolence that is the responsibility of the local church. We will list the nine passages for you to read for yourself, then ask two questions on each passage for you to answer from your Bible. When you have read the passages and answered the questions yourself, you will have the answers to two questions that are disturbing churches of Christ. The two questions are: (1) Who is the congregation to relieve in benevolence? and (2) What organization is authorized to do that relief work? The answers will come from nothing but a study of the Word of God. (*Questions by Jesse G. Jenkins*)

- Acts 2: 44 - 45
Who did the congregations here relieve? Saints? Sinners? or Orphans?
What organization did this relief work? The local church? A sponsoring church? or A Benevolent Corporation?
- Acts 4: 32 - 35
Who did the congregation here relieve? Saints? Sinners? or Orphans?
What organization did this relief work? The local church? A sponsoring church? or a Benevolent Corporation?
- Acts 6: 1 - 6
Who did the congregation here relieve? Saints? Sinners? or Orphans?
What organization did this relief work? The local church? A Sponsoring church? or a Benevolent Corporation?
- Acts 11: 27 - 30
Who did the congregation here relieve? Saints? Sinners? or Orphans?
What organization did this relief work? The local church? A Sponsoring church? or a Benevolent Corporation?
- Romans 15: 25 - 32
Who did the congregation here relieve? Saints? Sinners? or Orphans?
What organization did this relief work? The local church? A Sponsoring church? or a Benevolent Corporation?
- I Corinthians 16: 1 - 3
Who did the congregation here relieve? Saints? Sinners? or Orphans?
What organization did this relief work? The local church? A Sponsoring church? or a Benevolent Corporation?
- 2 Corinthians 8
Who did the congregation here relieve? Saints? Sinners? or Orphans?
What organization did this relief work? The local church? A Sponsoring church? or a Benevolent Corporation?
- 2 Corinthians 9
Who did the congregation here relieve? Saints? Sinners? or Orphans?
What organization did this relief work? The local church? A Sponsoring church? or a Benevolent Corporation?
- I Timothy 5: 9 - 16
Who did the congregation here relieve? Saints? Sinners? or Orphans?
What organization did this relief work? The local church? A Sponsoring church? or a Benevolent Corporation?

We hope this study will help clarify the issue in your mind. We hope you have been able to see that we are not against helping the needy, widows and orphans, but we are striving to do this work as the Bible teaches. "*We walk by faith, not by sight*", and where there is no Bible authority there can be no "*walking by faith*".

There is no Bible authority for many churches pooling their funds into the hands of a board that it might direct a work of general benevolence for all churches.

In the New Testament each church, within its own framework, cared for its own; and when one was unable to do so, other churches sent relief unto the elders for the poor saints. (Acts 11: 27 - 30; I Cor. 16:1 - 2; 2 Cor. chapters 8 and 9).

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