

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #82: SOME THOUGHTS ON CHURCH BENEVOLENCE

By John Temples

An essential characteristic of Christianity is *benevolence*--good works, acts of kindness, help for people in need. As followers of Christ, we are taught to do good to all. But sometimes benevolence is misunderstood, even by church members. As an elder, I've had church members ask me, "Why isn't the church helping___?" And I have actually had people come in off the street and demand that the church meet this or that need, saying, "You are a church, so you are supposed to help me." Let's study this benevolence issue from a Scriptural and a real-world, pragmatic standpoint.

First: It is a fact beyond dispute that Christians, both individually and collectively as the church, have a responsibility to help the poor and the needy. The Bible charges us: "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love...distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality" (Romans 12:10, 13). Galatians 6:10 says, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." Paul taught, "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need" (Ephesians 4:28).

However, benevolence is not the primary work of the church. The local church was never meant to be merely a welfare agency or a means of meeting the physical needs of people. Jesus fed and healed people, and so did the apostles; but that was not their primary work. Rather, the good works were a means to the saving of souls.

Here is a good question to ask: What is the work of the church as outlined in Scripture? It is three-fold:

- *Evangelism*--teaching people the plan of salvation, leading them to Christ, bringing them into the Lord's church.

- *Edification*--everything the church does for those who have been converted, such as providing Bible classes, conducting worship services, etc.
- *Benevolence*--assisting the needy.

So, benevolence is only a part of the work of the church, and not even the most important part. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-16) did not say, "Go into all the world and feed the hungry." It said, "Go and preach the gospel." So here is an important principle: *The primary work of the church is spiritual, not physical.*

But lest we misunderstand, let me say again: the Bible teaches us to be compassionate, and doing good to others is an absolutely vital part of the life of an individual Christian and a local church. Let these sobering words of Jesus sink in: "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take me in, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me" (Matthew 25:41-43).

But now let us think about some practical matters--how we actually DO benevolence:

HOW IS THE CHURCH TO HELP PEOPLE AND WHAT KINDS OF HELP ARE WE TO GIVE?

No church, no matter how large, has unlimited resources. We simply cannot help everybody with every problem. What would happen if your congregation undertook to feed and clothe all the needy people in just your own city or town? The church would quickly go broke. Not even civil government can accomplish that goal, much less local churches.

So choices have to be made. Both as individuals and as the church, we have to use wisdom and discretion when practicing benevolence. Furthermore, we must follow the commands and guidelines of Scripture. There are some Biblical limits on benevolence. In fact, it is even possible to sin by helping some individuals! The first principle to keep in mind, which we have already discussed, is this:

BENEVOLENCE MUST NOT OVERRIDE EVANGELISM AND EDIFICATION IN THE ALLOCATION OF CHURCH RESOURCES

If a church drains its treasury helping the poor, then the more important work of evangelism suffers. And even then, the poor are still going to be poor!

There's another principle to be considered, and that is the Biblical order of responsibility for meeting people's physical needs. Who is responsible for helping when someone goes hungry, loses a job, or has a sudden and unexpected medical catastrophe? Several parties; and actually, in many cases, the church is the party of last resort.

THE BIBLICAL ORDER OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR MEETING OF NEEDS

The first resource is the needy person himself. You've heard the saying, "The Lord helps those who help themselves." That is not in Scripture, but the principle is. The Bible teaches that as much as possible, we are responsible for paying our own bills and meeting our own needs and obligations:

- "Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 12:7-8).
- "For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread" (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

If a person is unable to work, that is one thing; but if he is unwilling to work, then the church has no responsibility to help. It's becoming more and more common for elders to receive requests for help in paying rent or utility bills (sometimes going back months). For one thing, that is impossible financially. For another thing, it's

sinful to not pay your bills, and the church cannot be a party to or an enabler of such. But suppose a person is truly trying, but has exhausted every personal means of meeting a legitimate physical need? What then?

The second resource in situations of need is family. In Matthew 15:5, Jesus leveled a blistering attack on the Pharisees for not helping their own family members. They were using a legal technicality to avoid supporting their aged parents (in effect, putting their wealth into a trust fund). Paul said in 1 Timothy 5:3-4, “Honor widows who are really [truly destitute] widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God.” Later, in verse 16, Paul said, “If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.” So before the church gets involved, a needy person must be trying to help himself, and his family is expected to help.

The third resource might be government agencies, homeless coalitions, food banks, etc. These are not mentioned in Scripture, because they were not in existence in Bible times. However, there are a lot of these agencies around; and people in need certainly ought to seek them out.

But if an individual has done all he or she can; and if family have done what they can; and public welfare sources have been utilized--then the church could step in. But another principle then comes into play:

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN MEMBERS AND NON-MEMBERS--CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS

Let me be clear: I am not saying that only Christians can be helped. Read Galatians 6:10 again: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, *especially to those who are of the household of faith.*” The word *especially* means “chiefly, first of all, receiving first priority.” This simply means that when a need arises, and resources are limited, any and all may be helped; *but Christians come first.* This is logical and realistic--if a disaster strikes, you instinctively take care of your own family before you help the neighbors.

So when a church is faced with a benevolence request, some questions need to be answered:

- Has the person actively tried to solve his own problem?
- Or did the person himself create the problem by not paying his bills, or refusing to work, or by engaging in unlawful or immoral activities?
- Beyond that, has his family helped him?
- Has he sought relief through available public resources?
Is he a church member or non-member? Church members have priority if resources are limited.

Another question elders or churches must answer is this:

WHAT KIND OF ASSISTANCE WILL (OR CAN) WE GIVE?

Almost every week, churches get requests for help with all kinds of expenses:

- Food
- Gas money
- Rent, electric bills, water bills, etc.
- Mortgage payments
- Motel/hotel bills
- Medicines, doctor bills, etc.
- Plane tickets

To repeat, if the church paid all these, it would be out of funds in a very short time. Besides these considerations, let's face it: some people have made bilking churches out of money into an art form. When I was preaching in Price, Utah, I often had to deal with people driving from (eastern state) to (western state) "for a job." They all amazingly ran out of gas money just as they reached Price.

One time, the church paid for some gas and a motel room for one of these individuals. The motel billed the church later, and on the bill was a large amount for phone calls. When we investigated, we found that this fellow had spent several

hours calling church in other towns, lining up donations and motel rooms as he went!

Another time, when I was preaching for a church in Florida, a man called and said his mother had died in Virginia, and could we please help him with a plane ticket? We did; and about a year later, the same man called and told the same story: his mother had died in Virginia, etc. I told him either he had a mother with amazing stamina or he needed to keep better records of which churches he had called!

With experiences like these, it takes compassion and discipline on church leaders' parts not to get cynical and say, "We're just not going to help anybody." No, that is not the way of Christ. So what do we do?

Here are two guidelines several churches I have worked with have followed: (1) In almost all circumstances, we do not give cash. We give food or gas vouchers, or pay merchants directly. (2) In general, we do not (and cannot) pay people's ongoing living expenses--rent, house payments, utility payments, etc. That is true even for our own members. To do so would drain our treasury very quickly. And it would not be fair to others who sacrifice and work to pay their own bills.

One final point, though: We need to try not to be too rigid and micromanage every benevolence request and situation. You just can't come up with a comprehensive, "one-size-fits-all" set of rules to rigidly apply to every conceivable case. To try to do that would do away with spontaneous generosity and compassion. There is a need for human judgment. That is one reason God put elders and deacons in each local church. We have to pray for wisdom and not be too quick to give money to the not-so-needy, but not too stingy and reluctant to help where a genuine need exists.

As Christians, and as local churches, we do not have a choice as to whether to help the needy or not. The Lord made it clear that we are to help others as we have ability and opportunity. Jesus said in Mark 14:7, "For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good." Generosity is going to be one of the criteria the Lord uses when He judges us. But we cannot, and

should not, indiscriminately pass out resources to anybody and everybody. May God help us to help others with wisdom and compassion. --John Temples