
ARE MISSIONARIES BEGGARS?

by Don W. Hillis

“How to be sure of the will of God” has been replaced as the number one problem of Christian young people who are thinking of missions. The big hang-up now is money. They object to begging for support.

David Howard of Inter-Varsity says, "It is the complaint I hear with more consistency than any other. Again and Again students say to me, “I believe that I am as committed to the Lord as I can be. I want to serve Jesus Christ. I am perfectly willing to go overseas and serve the Lord, but this business of going around and drumming up support, I cannot buy it. I will not buy it!” Howard describes this attitude of many potential missionary candidates in these words, “You've got yourself set with all your affluence, and now I come to you on my hands and knees and ask you to support me.”

Howard Fenton Jr., adds, “They are right...it is a problem. There is something underlying the method that tends to degrade the candidate - it does support an economic double standard...the missionary does have experiences where he laughs because he doesn't want to cry. Maybe there is a better way. If so, what is it?”

Fortunately, it is possible to be both sympathetic and Scriptural toward the problem. And just as fortunately, the Scriptures are far from silent on this issue.

In the Old Testament economy, those who served the Lord and his people (the priests, Levites and prophets) lived off the tithes and offerings of the people. And there was a definite relationship between Israel's faithfulness in giving and God's blessing the nation. The prophet Malachi accused Israel of robbing God in relation to tithes and offerings. He then promised that God would open the “window of heaven” to those who would be faithful in the matter of giving (Malachi 3:8-10).

Jesus, who so easily could have turned stones into bread and multiplied loaves and fishes, lived off the gifts of His friends during his public ministry. He pulled the economic rug out from under the feet of those He called into His service. He insisted that the fishermen should leave their fishing, the tax collector, his tax collecting and the tent maker, his tent making.

When Jesus sent out the seventy “into every city and place,” He commanded them to “carry neither purse, nor script, nor shoes.” They were to accept the hospitality of those who would open their homes, “eating and drinking such things as they give: for the laborer is worthy of his hire.” (Luke 10:4-7)

Whether it involves the preacher in America or the missionary overseas, the Lord has ordained that those who “preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel” (I Corinthians 9:14). And is a pastor expecting his people to support him any different from an apostle (missionary) expecting churches to support him?

As far as I can discover, Paul only apologized once to the Corinthian believers for failing to insist that they should share his support. He assured them that this is a way they could prove the sincerity of their love for God. He warned them of the danger of sowing sparingly and encourage them with the reward of sowing bountifully. He assured them that God is able to make all grace abound toward them in this matter of sacrificial giving. He reminded them that God loves a cheerful giver.

Paul used illustrations: (1) the Macedonian believers who gave out of their deep poverty; (2) Christ who gave up the riches of heaven; and (3) the Father's willingness to give His indescribable Gift to us.

Though Paul, as a missionary, had learned how to be abased and to abound, how to be full and how to hunger, he rebuked those who were careless about giving to the Lord's servants and commended those who were faithful.

The missionary does not accept the gifts of God's people as handouts for his personal well-being. He is a representative of God's work. That work does not go on unless God's servants do it and they cannot do it without support.

Another answer is to take a new look at some positive values found in raising one's own support. Several of today's largest and fastest-growing missionary organizations use this system. And the personalized support program is a basic contributing factor to their growth.

Deep, personal relationships between the Christian worker and his home church do much to promote a long-time interest in both giving and intercession. And, without the intercession of many friends, the battle can be lost. Furthermore, any deep sense of God's leading should be accompanied by the confidence that when he guides, He also provides. Raising one's own support is a challenge to faith.

Dr. Fenton shares this wise counsel with missionary candidates, "See yourself not as a huckster of your own services or as a promoter of your own support, but as one who has firsthand contact with God - and who, therefore, has something to share with others. See your mission to the churches not as a money-raising junket, but as a further fulfillment of the Great Commission; you are going because of a divine call - to share with others what you know about Jesus Christ.

When the missionary candidate sees raising his support as an opportunity to prove his faith, to inform fellow Christians of God's work, to inspire them to invest in the things of eternal consequence and to encourage them to pray for him and for the work of his Lord, then his deputation is no longer a mountain, but a ministry. He probably will even find himself making new personal friendships that will be of rich spiritual benefit to him, to his friends and to his work. There is no substitute for friends who really care.

"After all pious platitudes have been swept away," says Fenton, "you will need the friendship, the prayers and the deep interest of God's people more than you need your monthly support. And a period of pre-field deputation may be the means God will use to give you a wider circle of praying friends than you presently have."

Paul appears to have counted the Philippian church as his home church. He had no sooner left the newly-found church at Philippi (Acts 16) than they sent financial aid to him. He received at least two "support checks" from them during his two weeks in Thessalonica (Philippians 4:16). These believers never lost their interest in supporting Paul but apparently there were times when they had no way of getting money to him.

Though this great missionary was willing to go without the necessities of life, he told the Philippian believers they had done well in supplying his financial needs. He obviously felt other churches should have done the same, and thus have fruit that would abound to their account (Philippians 4:14-17).

The common denominator in the accounts of Elisha accepting the hospitality of the widow of Zarephath, Elisha rooming with the Shunamite family, Jesus eating in the home of Mary and Martha, and Paul enjoying the gracious

hospitality of Philemon is that of giving and receiving. Though the recipients did not take the kindness of the givers for granted, neither did they apologize for being on the receiving end. In each of these cases a warm personal relationship was built up between the giver and the receiver.

There are hundreds of missionaries whose testimonies corroborate that of TEAM's missionary, Bessie Degerman, as she says, "I would not exchange the faith-expanding experiences I had watching the Lord supply my needs for going to Japan for anything. It has been one of the highlights of my missionary experience."

Are missionaries beggars? I guess the answer really depends upon one's perspective of God's work and interpretation of His Word.

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