

Money and Ministers: A Pauline Perspective

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PAULINE CHURCHES” Introduction

In the vast study of the life and ministry of Paul and of the New Testament churches, one finds a wealth of information on virtually every aspect imaginable. However, there are some issues that the common believer and often the common minister rarely study and research. They remain in the dark about issues with significant relevance for how ministry is done in the twenty-first century. One such issue is the question of how ministers in the Pauline churches were treated and compensated. Did these ministers have secular jobs or were they solely devoted to the work of ministry? Were these ministers paid a set salary by the church? Were they paid at all by the believers whom they served? What sort of privileges were they entitled to, if any? This topic, though rather infrequent in study, may offer many insights and implications for how the church should operate today. The purpose of the following study is therefore to investigate how these ministers that labored for the furthering of the gospel were supported.

Ministers in the Pauline Churches

Before one begins to explore the compensation of ministers in the Pauline churches, he must first have a confident grasp of who these ministers were. Specifically, one should know what titles the early church attributed to their leaders and what these leaders’ duties included.

Everyone as “Ministers”

Ministry in Paul’s day had much more to do with the free exercising of the spiritual gifts. The early church did not equate ministry with ecclesiastical appointment or positional leadership as is the prevalent trend of today. Rather, these individuals understood that every believer is a “minister” of the gospel.¹ Justifiably, according to the Pauline churches, every individual under the blood of Christ came under the title of “minister.” Throughout the rest of the study, the term “minister” will be understood to encompass all the titles and positions given to those in authority over the church and not simply to every believer.

Definite Structure

However informal or tentative, there was certainly some structure to the Christian community because it was a recognizable organization in the eyes of the secular world. Organization in ministry is reflected throughout the scriptures with the mention of Jesus appointing disciples² and the appointing of elders and overseers by Paul and Barnabas³, Timothy and Titus.⁴ The letters to the Philippians and to the Thessalonians address these church leaders.⁵

¹The Greek word “minister” in the New Testament is “diakonos.” It can be difficult to know whether some usages in the New Testament are referring to “deacons” as an order of minister, or if they are referring to the general servanthood which all Christians are called to. For more on the subject, see Leon Morris, *Ministers of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1964), 80-90.

²1 Cor 15:5; Mark 3:13-19; 6:7, 30; Luke 6:12-16; Matt 4:18-22.

³Acts 14:23.

⁴1 Tim 3:1-13; 2 Tim 2:2; Tit 1:5-9.

⁵Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 5:12.

In addition, order was traditional in first-century Judaism, out of which the Christian church originated. Even the ancient Qumran community is an example of a highly structured religious community.⁶

Titles for Church Authorities

Scripture references several various titles for early church leaders. Such names include “presbyters,” “elders,” “bishops,” “overseers,” “deacons,” “apostles,” and “evangelists.” The first four of these designations might be names given to the exact same position of leadership and are simply variations of the highest role given to anyone in a Pauline church.⁷ For this reason, the term “elder” will be used throughout the duration of this study to refer to one called an “elder,” a “bishop,” “presbyter,” or “overseer.” These titles were generally given to a group of individuals in each church rather than just one individual.

The “elders” were in charge of making important decisions on behalf of the church, overseeing the affairs of the church, and perhaps delegating various ministry positions among

⁶Much of this work was paraphrased from E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 88-89.

⁷The present author is aware of various views regarding this issue among different denominations. See the use of “episkopous” in Acts 20:28 as well as the synonymous use of “presbuteros” and “episkopon” in Tit 1:5-7. For a sound scriptural and historical presentation of this statement, see Leon Morris, *Ministers of God* (London: Inter-Varsity, 1964), 70-80.

themselves or among lay leadership. Their duty was to shepherd over the church and lovingly care for it. Despite this group's elevated status, they most certainly submitted to the pastorship and counsel of the apostle Paul, and much more the supreme and divine leadership of the Holy Spirit.

The "deacons" seem to be best described as servants of high esteem and repute. These men were appointed by the church to carry out common tasks that might have seemed small, but remained necessary for the good of the body. Their ministry was likely more practical than spiritual.⁸

The "apostles" were those who were most similar to modern missionaries. These people were "messengers" who were sent out to various areas to further the spread of the gospel. Similar in their role, but more limited in duty, "evangelists" performed the literal meaning of their name by going about sharing the good news.⁹

Compensation of the Ministers

The leaders of the Pauline churches were compensated for their duties in a variety of ways. These ways sometimes included (but were not limited to) financial support. How then did the believers in the Pauline churches repay their leaders for their acts of service and their "labors"?

⁸Ibid, 82-83. Morris suggests that deacons are best described as servants who "exercise[d] responsibility in the temporal affairs of the Church." He adds that they were largely financial and administrative officers.

⁹For more detailed descriptions of these various titles and the characteristics, duties, and methods of appointment of each, one might look in: Hans Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. J.A. Baker (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969), 76-123; Herbert Lockyer, *All the Trades and Occupations of the New Testament: A Fascinating Study of Ancient Arts and Crafts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 108-118; and Leon Morris, *Ministers of God* (London: Inter-Varsity, 1964), 70-80.

Research finds that the compensation can be broken down into the following two major subdivisions: (1) the physical and practical needs and (2) the spiritual and relational needs.

Physical and Practical Needs

Evidence confirms that Christians of the first-century made attempts to meet the ministers' practical needs in many different ways. Spurred by the words of Paul and his exhortations, they showed hospitality to their leaders and shared with them all that they had.¹⁰ It is for this reason that Paul and his followers were provided with housing and food by believers in various cities along their journeys to spread the gospel.¹¹ Other times such as in the book of Acts, one reads of the leaders being rescued by the believers from the hands of those who desired to kill them. In each of these instances, the believers essentially saved the minister's life.¹² At other times, the practical need of the minister was for more help. He might have needed a partner or an extra set of hands to toil alongside him. Paul had this need met several times and he proceeded to do the same for others by sending out leaders to offer assistance where needed.¹³ Indeed, a scholar

¹⁰Rom 16:12; Gal 6:6; 1 Thess 5:12-13.

¹¹Paul and his companions were not the only individuals to be provided for and housed. There were other apostles, missionaries, Christians that were forced to rely on it from time to time. Paul and his friends stayed with many individuals that can most be read about in Acts. Some such individuals were Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:15), Jason in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9), Priscilla and Aquilla in Corinth (Acts 18:2-4), Philemon (indicated in the context of the book that bears that name), and Gaius and Titius Justus (both mentioned in Rom 16). A good source on this issue is Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 25-26.

¹²Acts 9:25, 30; 14:20; 17:5-15; 19:29; 23:16; 27:3.

¹³1 Cor 16:10-11; 2 Cor 12:18; Eph 6:22; Acts 11:22; Acts 15:22; 1 Tim 1:3; Tit 1:5; Phil 2:19, 25, 4:16; 1 Thess 3:2.

would not surmise to say that there were times when the needs of the minister were the same as the need of the ministry. The servants of Christ passionately long for the Father's work to be done. Therefore, if the believing church could offer assistance and meet the needs of the ministry, often they would be compensating the minister by meeting his needs as well.

Finally, there were some types of financial gifts given to the ministers. Nevertheless, we do know that those who could work for themselves must have done so, using their monetary resources for the kingdom's growth. It is safe to believe that some of Paul and Barnabas's missionary journeys were paid in part by the church.¹⁴ However, it is more than likely that Paul and Barnabas worked hard to raise money by remaining employed.¹⁵ Paul's tentmaking with Aquilla and Priscilla was not for his own additional wealth, but rather to use for Christ's name to be lifted high. Most scholars seem to believe that some monetary compensation was necessary. After all, if a fisherman or farmer became an itinerant preacher, he certainly could not have found employment in all the places that Paul was able to with his trade of craftsmanship. For this reason, it was recognized as an apostle's duty to accept the gift of the church he would serve in. Paul, however, departed from this tradition from time to time. For example, Paul refused to accept monetary blessing from the Corinthians. He felt it absolutely necessary that the gospel of grace be presented free of charge. This had much to do with Paul's own convictions and his aim in ministry. His motives were also intent at disproving some Corinthian accusations that he had

¹⁴For example, see Phil 4:14-18 and Rom 15:24-26.

¹⁵Barnabas was first noted to have sold his property and laid the money at the apostles' feet (Acts 4:36-37) and Paul is known to have supported himself on the mission field with Priscilla and Aquilla through tentmaking (Acts 18:3).

desired to rob the people.¹⁶ It was only later in his second letter to the Corinthians that Paul insisted that the church fulfill their pledge of monetary support. Paul also accepted the financial gifts of the Philippian church and other churches along the way, but this was primarily to meet the needs of both Paul and the church at Jerusalem and to show gratitude to both for their work.

Spiritual and Relational Needs

Interestingly enough, the compensation of ministers often took place when the congregation “ministered” to the “minister.” For certain, the church body and elders acted as beloved friends to the Apostle Paul. The Ephesian elders in Acts weep when they learn it will be their last time to be with the apostle Paul on earth.¹⁷ A further display of this love is evident all three times Paul addresses two of his disciples, Philemon and Timothy, as his children.¹⁸ Another way the church sought to repay the ministers for their duties was in intercession. With a strong knowledge of any disciple of Christ, one understands just how vitally important this recompense was and how much it was appreciated by the ministers.¹⁹ Paul’s letters plea the believers for

¹⁶For more detailed study of Paul’s collection for the saints at Jerusalem as well as his conflict with the Corinthians over financial matters, see Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, trans. John H. Schutz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 39-51 and J.M. Everts, “Financial Support,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and others, 295-300.

¹⁷Acts 20:36.

¹⁸Paul addresses Philemon as his “child” in Phlm 10 and Timothy as his “child” in 1 Cor 4:17 and Phil 2:22.

¹⁹Acts 12:5-12; 15:33; 20:34-35; 21:4-7.

prayer and they thank the believers for prayer.²⁰

Finally, there was a certain level of respect and reverence given to the ministers by those under their authority. This group of individuals was given the authority to make important administrative decisions for the church and spiritually discern important matters as mentioned earlier in the profile of ministers.²¹ These ministers were to stand before the people and take the lead. These ministers were looked to for wisdom and guidance. They were understood as shepherds of the flock.²² The people treated them as men ordained by God to be leaders of His people. They knew that there was no authority that God did not put into being.²³

Conclusion

The exploration of how ministers in the Pauline churches were compensated is thus completed. In closing, the research will be briefly summarized and some practical applications will be made along with some further thoughts. Reflection on the text of Phil. 4:14-19, written to arguably Paul's favorite church community of all, reveals to us that the ministers of the church received their fill by having their needs met by the church.²⁴ These needs included physical, material, spiritual, and relational needs. These verses serve as a summary of the present study's results. What one ultimately sees is actually a beautiful picture of the served acting out of loving

²⁰2 Thess 3:1-5; Eph 6:19-20; Col 4:2-6.

²¹Acts 15:6; Acts 16:4; 1 Cor 16:15-16; Rom 13; 1 Tim 3:4-5; 5:17; 1 Pet 5:1-4.

²²John 21:16.

²³Col 1:16; Tit 2:15.

²⁴J.Paul Sampley expounds upon this scripture in *Pauline Partnership in Christ: Christian Community and Commitment in Light of Roman Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 51.

gratitude and serving their own teachers. Concerning secular employment, one sees substantial evidence in scripture of ministers who have secular jobs.²⁵ Therefore this is perfectly justifiable provided that the minister remains faithful to the duties that the Lord and the church have delegated to him. But what implications for today's New Testament church does this convey? How is the local New Testament church down the street fulfilling this responsibility? Are they offering too much compensation to the extent that the primary ministers have more than they need? Or are churches falling short in compensating for their ministers needs? As the ministry of the gospel spreads and furthers, it is of utmost importance that the church strives to meet the needs of the ministers. It is wrong when the church exceeds this boundary, and it is wrong when the church does not provide enough for these needs.

Surely there exist some practical examples of how a modern day New Testament church might provide for its leaders both physically as well as spiritually. A congregation should always be obedient to the spirit in making sure that their leaders have their basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Members of a New Testament church could very easily compensate a beloved minister by offering babysitting, occasionally paying for the minister and his wife to go on a date, buying school supplies for their children, offering help with any possible medical bills, preparing the minister's family an occasional meal, donating clothing, or even helping the minister pay for automobile upkeep. Members of the church body such as deacons might serve their authorities by helping the ministers execute mundane tasks and being available for the

²⁵Paul joined with Aquilla and Priscilla in the tentmaking business in Acts 18:3. Lydia was a seller of fabrics (Acts 16:14) and Gaius was a city treasurer (Rom 16:23). For more information and commentary on this matter, see Robert J. Banks, "Church Order and Government," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and others, 135.

ministers to delegate certain responsibilities. Those in the church with the spiritual gift of encouragement might find fulfillment in vicariously edifying the body through edifying the ministers. Friendship is a necessity for every minister within the church. Members should take action in providing it instead of allowing their ministers to be estranged or distant from them. Those with the gift of intercession will surely find fulfillment in praying for the ministry as well as the ministers. The blessing that a minister receives when members are faithful to pray for them is a compensation in itself.

It is also worth mentioning that a misunderstanding exists largely among the body of Christ. This misunderstanding is the idea that a bi-vocational minister is somehow less spiritual or less devoted to the ministry than a full-time minister who serves within the church alone. As we have seen, Paul's example proves that bi-vocational ministry is a biblical model. In today's setting, there is a great need for bi-vocational ministers. Sometimes they are needed in order that the minister might better identify with the individuals under his leadership. Sometimes bi-vocational ministers are necessary for the church to exist.

Finally, a harmony should exist within the church body. This is to be the overall arching principle. Ministers should expect for their essential needs to be met with the assistance of the congregation. If strife arises over the level of compensation—whether the church or the minister claims it to be too much or too little—the body should reason together immediately to restore unity within the church. Ministers should do abundantly more than is expected of them in serving those under their leadership. Likewise, the congregation should do the same for the leaders.

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