
What Can the Church Own?

“Neither was there any among them that lacked; for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles’ feet . . .” (Acts 4:34-35)

The church in every age has had access to and responsibility for a tremendous amount of wealth. The Jerusalem church was no exception. The very idea that people sold their lands and houses and gave the money to the church almost literally boggles the mind. Now the question arises, “For what can the church legitimately spend this money?”

At the risk of being redundant may I remind you that this is a book about love. We are endeavoring to prove that a legalistic approach to Christianity is utterly insufficient to answer even the most basic questions relative to the functions of the Christian assembly. The question before us is no exception.

The situation in Jerusalem was really quite simple. Thousands of pilgrims had traveled to that holy city for the Jewish passover. They had remained for Pentecost and had been converted to Christ. The crowded conditions of the city made

it impossible for them to find work and their travel funds had been depleted by their extended stay. The remarkable "fellowship" or "koinonia" which they had with one another is exemplified by their tremendous love and generosity. Can you imagine what would happen in your community if the church was known by this dimension of love? Truly the Jerusalem fellowship was like a city upon a hill which could not be hid.

The conduct of the Jerusalem church was governed by "needs" not "rules." This immediately involved them in providing food, clothing, shelter, medicine, comfort, counseling, and many other needs, which beset the Christian community. It is not unreasonable to assume that at least some equipment would have been needed to expedite the meeting of these needs. Women like Dorcas may have needed needles and thread and vast sums of material from which to make clothing for the needy. They may have needed additional materials and equipment to wash and prepare used clothing which had been donated to the poor.

Ministering to the needs of thousands of hungry people can become a complex and complicated assignment. We have no way of determining exactly how the hungry were fed, but again it is not unreasonable to assume that at least some equipment to prepare, distribute, and deliver the food was needed. The technical details of who "owned" the equipment was totally irrelevant. The important thing was the needs of the people.

One of the reasons why we have so many hassles over what the church can or cannot own is that we have misunderstood the very nature of Christianity. It is not a system built upon law, but upon love. Every legal concept or statement must be interpreted. Even a code of conduct as simple and as brief as the Ten Commandments had thrown the Jewish people into spasms of controversy. The law was a "schoolmaster" to bring us unto Christ. It was to teach us, among other things, the utter futility of trying to solve the needs of the world through legalism.

Viewed from the legal standpoint the very simple situation in Jerusalem suddenly becomes tremendously complex. Some who resent the idea of the church being turned into a "restaurant" or "haberdashery" will attempt to prove that the church can only receive and distribute "money." Money, they reason, could be given to the poor and needy and then they can buy their own provisions. This would free the church from the many

problems and complexities of handling food and raiment. But what is "money"? Many primitive societies do not have coins or cash at all but exist by trading pigs and chickens for clothing and grain. What would these people give to the church, and what would the church do with what they give? In Jerusalem there may very well have been people who had no money to give but who did give food, grain, or other commodities which were directly needed to alleviate human suffering.

The whole question of what the church can or cannot own is not nearly as important as what the church does with what it does own. If the church is using a tax exempt status to enter into unfair competition with legitimate business it would be diametrically opposed to the very principle of love. We must love others as we would want to be loved. We must do unto others as we would want them to do unto us. It is also basically unChristian to watch people suffer and die and do nothing because we are afraid of some legal technicality.

On the Mission Field

Legalism is invariably inconsistent. It causes us to operate under a double set of standards. The legalist will be very apt to bind upon others a variety of burdens which he would not touch with one of his fingers. All of which seems perfectly logical when you are twisted into a tangle of your own design. Remember, every way of a man is right in his own eyes.

The man who baptized me into Christ lamented the fact that his congregation would send money to Africa to evangelize black people, but wouldn't even invite them to church right here in the United States of America. We are proud of our missionaries when they build schools and hospitals but we would argue until midnight that our own church has no business getting involved in such matters. I heard recently of three American churches who turned down an opportunity to run a hospital for this very reason. Half way around the world we expect the church to feed the hungry and clothe the naked but we would strenuously object to any systematic meeting of similar needs here at home. How many churches do you know of here in America that have any viable programs to meet physical and social needs in their own community? I know of missionaries who established a bookstore in a foreign city. It became a self-supporting medium through which Christian literature has been distributed to thousands of people. An

American church which strongly supported that very mission turned down a bookstore which was offered to them in their community. Our inconsistencies are almost without number. A few courageous congregations are breaking out of the traditional mold, but their critics are legion.

There is a very real sense in which the United States of America is a mission field. We are beset by violence and crime of unparalleled proportions. Our homes are eroding away and our children are disenchanting. Perhaps it is time for us to employ the same evangelistic fervor and humanitarian concern which we expect of our missionaries in foreign lands.

It is ironic, almost beyond words, that the one thing which the traditional Christian Community feels safe in owning, may be the very worst investment of the Lord's money. We may not be sure about owning a coffee house, a hospital, an orphanage, an old people's home, a gymnasium, or virtually anything else . . . but we feel certain that it is right to own a church building. We can sink a half million dollars into some grandiose "sanctuary" in which to worship Jesus and none of our colleagues will condemn us. Most of them will gaze upon it with envy and admiration . . . even though it may prove to be the most worthless weapon in the Christian arsenal. We may use it less than five hours a week. It may dominate a lion's share of our budget. The stewardship of that facility may prove to be the major function of our corporate existence.

May I respectfully remind you that history considers the time as "The Dark Ages" when buildings were more important than people. Following the crusades the Roman church owned one-third of all the real properties of Europe. The feudal system left vast segments of society in abject poverty and indescribable need. The church in the meanwhile was not as concerned with the needs of the people as it was with ornate cathedrals and exquisite chandeliers. It was at this time that Julius II demolished St. Peter's Basilica and determined to rebuild it on such a grand scale that the entire revenues of the Roman See would not suffice to pay for its construction. At this juncture in history Tetzal toured Europe to sell indulgences. The ignorant and superstitious masses were promised the forgiveness of their sins the moment that their money clinked in the coffer. It was this blasphemous swindle which prompted Martin Luther to draft his famous ninety-five theses and to nail them to the castle door in Whittenberg.

A Lesson from Hetty Green

Harriet Green has the dubious distinction of being listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the "World's Greatest Miser." She had one hundred million dollars in the bank and was too cheap to take her own son to the doctor. She procrastinated until the boy's leg had to be amputated.

The story of the family fortune is told by Arthur H. Lewis in his excellent book, *The Day They Shook the Plum Tree* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. N.Y.). The story begins in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1624 with the purchase of one black cow. The frugal and prolific family in a few short generations had multiplied that original investment into a six million dollar fortune. Hetty Green inherited this money in 1865 and went on to amass a hundred million dollar estate.

Hetty died in 1916. At that time she was perhaps the richest and yet the most detested woman in the world. She left her millions to her two children.

Ned, her one-legged son, became a play boy. He spent some three million dollars a year on yachts, stamps, diamond studded chastity belts, pornography and teenage prostitutes, orchid culture and Texas politics.

Her daughter, Sylvia, became an irrational recluse who kept \$31,000,000 in one bank account that did not even draw interest. Her gardener, Dan Chicko, worked thirty years for Sylvia. She spoke to him only twice in all that time. Once to tell him that his wages would be docked because he was late to work, and the other time to tell him to keep his daughter off the premises . . . she didn't like children.

They're all dead now. The plum tree has been shaken. Almost without exception the money to which that family was enslaved has wound up where it was needed the least and where it would accomplish a minimum amount of good.

The church ought to learn a lesson from Hetty Green. The "bottom line" in our relationship with deity does not involve how many buildings we erect or how much money we amass, but how many people we help. Jesus valued people and used things, and too often we value things and use people.

The Christian Church was born in a world that revelled in religious architecture. The Jewish Temple was begun by Herod in 19 B.C. and was not completed until A.D. 64. It was the largest and most ornate temple ever erected to Jehovah. In other cities like Baalbek, Ephesus, and Corinth were other

temples erected to pagan deities. The early church by contrast did not build temples. The church itself was the temple of God and Jesus found a sanctuary in the heart of every believer. The money they invested went directly to meet human needs and to alleviate human suffering.

Hetty Green never gave a dime to any humanitarian cause. One newspaper made this statement and was challenged by irate members of the family. They did not back down, but instead published a challenge for anyone who had ever been helped by Hetty Green to come forward and be identified. No one came!

In the end of the age the compassionate Christ may write "Ichabod" across the investments of which we are the most proud and say, ". . . I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not . . ." (Matthew 25:42-43).

The Social Gospel

A generation ago the "liberals" abandoned the doctrine of the blood atonement and Biblical conversion for mere humanitarianism. They did not care what happened to a man after he died, their only concern involved the "here and now." Such a pendulous extreme is a betrayal of Christ and a denial of much of His teaching. Now we see many "conservative" congregations at the opposite extreme. We will preach to the hungry, sing songs to the cold and naked, pass out tracts to those who are sick, and pray for the strangers. This too can be a betrayal of Christ and a denial of much of His teaching. Notwithstanding we give them not those things which are needful to the body, what doth it profit?

The church is the body of Christ, and what Jesus began to do in the body the body continues to do in Jesus. Those who possess His Spirit will inevitably show compassion on every human need and will make every reasonable effort to do for that person what Jesus would do for them. It probably would be wise for us to purge from our vocabulary such terms as "liberal," "conservative," etc. for it is always easier to hate a label than it is a person. Once we label someone they are to a certain extent dehumanized. Perhaps this is the reason Jesus warned against calling someone "raca" or "fool."

Love Meets Needs

When I speak with admiration and appreciation about missionaries who build and operate schools and hospitals there is ever the danger that someone will falsely assume that the church ought to do this in every community. It would be sheer folly for the church to erect a clap trap medical station in the shadows of Mayo Clinic. The needs of our communities ought to regulate and direct our activities and expenditures.

Man's number one need is, of course, conversion. The first and great commandment is to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Before someone can be converted he must receive with meekness the implanted Word which is able to save his soul. Now what can the church own in order to meet this need? The list, of course, is virtually limitless.

It would include buildings, microphones, printing presses, radio and television stations, satellites, cameras, projectors, recorders, and a host of other items too numerous to mention. Often it is both possible and practical for the church to utilize such item which someone else owns. Remember, however, that love meets needs.

Sometimes our traditions make void our ability to meet needs. I know of people who have tried to evangelize in the inner city with 19th century methods developed in the mid-west. They will build a "little brown church in the dale" in the shadow of a high rise apartment and wonder why the world is unconverted. Trying to evangelize in the megalopolis with this mentality is comparable to the little child who wanted to stop up the Mississippi River with a corn cob.

The second great commandment is that we love our neighbor as ourselves. The legalist will want to know "and who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan to answer this question and then commanded us to "go and do likewise."

Many social programs which the government has instituted stem directly from the churches' failure to get involved. We have passed by on the other side and left such matters to the irreligious. What can the church own to meet these social needs? It is impossible to make a list which would ever be complete. If we could it would be out of date within a year. Not only do needs vary and change, but our technology to meet those needs increases with each rising of the sun. Around the corner may be discoveries which will make the computer,

the xerox machine, and the television seem primitive and ineffective by comparison. The question of whether the church can own such things or not is almost totally irrelevant. The big question is whether or not we are meeting human needs. If we view God as a harsh and austere Judge, we are apt to bury our talent in the ground and refuse to take a chance . . . God help us to do anything but that!

Remember! The mark of the Christian is not what we own . . . but love. By this shall all men know that we are His disciples, if we have love one to another.

Questions for Discussion — Lesson Eight

1. Discuss the needs of the Jerusalem church and the way those needs were met.
2. Should the church get involved in every kind of thing that Jesus did?
3. Do you agree that we have a different standard for missionaries? If so, why?
4. Is it possible that someday someone may send missionaries to the United States of America?
5. Do you agree that the early church evangelized without church buildings? If so, how did they do it, and could the same be done today?
6. What is the value of your present facilities? and how many hours each week are they used?
7. Make a list of ten needs in your community which need to be met.
8. How could your church help to meet those needs?
9. List things which your church owns today which were not available fifty years ago.
10. List things which your church could own today which would help to meet the needs of your community.