
Whom Can the Church Hire?

“. . . The labourer is worthy of his reward . . .” (I Timothy 5:18)

When we attempt to answer such questions as whom the church can hire, it is important that we think in terms of Scripture as opposed to our American religious heritage.

Many people still think of the “church” as a little building in a “valley by the wildwood.” We nostalgically think that these were the “good old days” and somehow believe that a return to their simple faith would solve all of the complex problems of modern society. There may be more truth in this concept than might first appear.

Our fathers in the faith were pioneers who initiated bold reform in the generation in which they lived. Wilson L. Thompson observes in his doctoral dissertation on “Small Colleges and Goal Displacement” that ninety percent of all college presidents in the United States before the Civil War were clergymen. In the year 1856 there were 40,000 individuals who graduated from American colleges and fully one-fourth of them entered the ministry.

When the minister arrived at the “church in the valley by the wildwood” he frequently became the most influential person

in the entire community. This is why he was called "the Parson," which simply means "person." Not only was he usually the best educated person in the community, but he served at the focal point of all community activity. The "meet'n house" where he preached was also the place where farmers met to discuss the problems of agriculture. Local citizens came here to debate social and political questions, and householders gathered to make plans for their families. Quite often that little building was also the local school and the Bible was a part of the curriculum. I stress again that these men were pioneers. They were bold thinkers who challenged the limited frontiers of their fathers. They dared to leave the traditional ruts of previous generations and to dream new dreams. With the help of God these dreams became reality, forged from the wilderness in a furnace of affliction. They did not "play it safe" and closely adhere to traditional thinking, they buried themselves in an exciting exploration of Scripture and out of that experience God spoke to them to meet the needs of their generation.

The secret of their amazing courage is not to be found in studying their amazing courage. It is to be found in studying the Bible. The Word of God is alive and active. It is able to build us up and to give us an inheritance among them which are sanctified. It is a perennial source of wisdom and courage; for God does not give us a spirit of timidity and fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. When we study the Word, as they did, perhaps we too will launch out into the mainstream of community activity.

For the last few generations the church has been obsessed by a fear mentality and has reacted by forming a defensive posture. We feel that Jesus must have made a tactical mistake by sending us out like sheep in the midst of wolves and we have improvised a wide variety of man made protective devices to "correct" the problem. We've been afraid to get involved in education, afraid to get involved in social problems, afraid to get involved in anything but "preaching the Gospel." Thus we build our little buildings and retreat from the world around us. Let crime run rampant and divorce mills grind away the foundations of society. We will ring the bell and preach to everyone who crosses the threshold of the "sanctuary." This, my friends, is not a first century concept. It is medieval. It is a monastic concept brought out of the dark ages and dressed up for the twentieth century.

First Century Nuns

At the risk of opening a pandora's box of controversy, permit me to remind you that the first century church did have a group of women who took a vow never to marry. They differ from modern "nuns," however, in a great many ways. Their qualifications are listed in I Timothy 5:9, 10.

"Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported of for her good works; if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work . . ."

The following verses forbid young widows to enter this group and take the vow or pledge never to marry again. It is my personal opinion that we are not at all talking about merely "supporting" needy people. It would seem that Christians have an obligation to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, regardless of their background or marital status. When the Christian finds a woman dying of starvation and exposure it is not necessary to have her fill out a questionnaire regarding her age, religious background, and whether or not her husband is still living. The subject before us is not just about benevolence. It is about a group of women who were supported by the early church to do good works.

It is my own personal opinion that Dorcas was such a woman. When Peter came to raise her from the dead all of the "widows" stood by him weeping and showing the coats and garments which Dorcas had made when she was "with them." When she was raised from the dead Peter called the saints and "widows" and presented her alive (Acts 9:36-41).

It is my further opinion that the "widows" of I Timothy 5 may also be directly related to the "aged women" of Titus 2:3-5. In this passage certain "aged women" were commanded to train the young women in their domestic responsibilities. Unhappily for the church and the world this Scripture has been buried beneath heaps of traditional thought and we have relegated the counseling of young women to young men who are ministers of the gospel. The tragedies resulting from this indiscretion are without number.

Back to the Basics

The reference to "nuns" or "widows" was not intended to promote the making of a "Scriptural list" of individuals who

could be hired by the church. Quite to the contrary. I would rather seek to prove that the list itself is a B.C. concept in an A.D. world.

The church is the body of Christ. A body is flexible. It can adjust to different circumstances with great dexterity if it is healthy. We need to abandon the paralytic mentality which would cause someone to think that it was "Scriptural" to support Paul because he was a preacher, but "unscriptural" to support Luke because he was a physician. The truth of the whole matter is that we have every right and every responsibility to invest the "Lord's money" on anyone or anything which helps to accomplish the work of Jesus in the world.

There is a sense in which we do this already without realizing it. Multiplied millions of the "Lord's money" is taken directly from the "Lord's treasury" and given to carpenters, mechanics, plumbers, painters, typewriter repairmen, lawyers, bankers, grocers, and a host of other individuals too numerous to mention. Usually we do not ask these men for a statement of faith or spiritual résumé. We hire them because we have a need. The same board, however, which will hire a man to fix the furnace and pay him with the Lord's money, may feel it is "unscriptural" to hire a doctor to fix a human body, or a psychiatrist to minister to the human mind. Our legalistic approach to spending the "Lord's money" needs a total re-evaluation.

The Faith of Our Fathers

I know a man in the midwest who lives on ten acres of ground. He farms exactly as his father did fifty years ago. He plows with a tractor purchased in the 1920's and harvests his corn by hand. He cooks on a wood stove purchased by his mother shortly after the turn of the century. He lives in a home built by his parents from wood harvested from their own land and fashioned into boards by the family saw mill. His operation is a "novelty." People either inquire about it out of curiosity or with the desire to purchase some of his antiques. In a world with two billion people going to bed hungry every night, it is fortunate that his philosophy of farming is not widespread.

There is a very real sense in which this man is not imitating his father at all. His father was a progressive thinker. While other farmers were thinking about those "new fangled tractors" he went out and bought one. When their horses failed to turn enough earth he began to do custom plowing for them. When

harvest time rolled around he owned the latest equipment and harvested for all their neighbors.

When we seek to emulate our fathers' faith, we must be willing to cast caution to the wind and face a new frontier. Our fathers' faith was in Christ and they refused to be intimidated by the dangers of the wilderness or the innovations which were necessary to cope with the unique problems which they encountered there. They closed the day by the kerosene lamp with an open Bible. Exhausted they would fall to their knees in prayer and cry out to God for wisdom. God answered their prayers. Somehow they not only survived, but they laid the foundation for the greatest country on earth and bequeathed to us a legacy of courage so that we might stand upon their shoulders and see new horizons.

Whom Did the First Century Church Hire?

We do not have a legalistic catalogue given to us in the Bible, but I have a growing conviction that the church of Jesus Christ has unlimited freedom to meet needs. The church in Jerusalem did minister to the needs of those who were victims of poverty and discriminations and they had every right to "hire" anything done which needed to be done. They could hire teachers, counselors, cooks, repairmen, administrators, doctors, dentists, farmers, or anyone else that they needed to alleviate human suffering.

The good Samaritan found the victim of a crime bleeding by the roadside. He bound his wounds and poured in oil and wine. This involved an expenditure. He took him to an inn and paid money to the proprietor. Moreover, he made arrangements to return and pay the additional expenses which would be incurred during the period of his recuperation. All of this involved money. With our legalistic approach to serving Jesus we would never have gotten anything like this through the committees or approved by the board. Like the priest and the Levite, we would have kept the "Lord's money" safe in our pockets and passed by on the other side.

Who Fixed the Roof?

Luke chapter five relates the thrilling story of four men who brought their paralyzed friend to see Jesus. When they arrived at the place where Jesus was they could not get near to him because of the multitude. The urgency of their mission

caused them to devise a bold and innovative plan. They carried their friend up to the roof, tore up the tiling, and lowered him down into the presence of Jesus. Hallelujah! Not only were his sins forgiven, but he was healed of his paralysis.

How would you like to have the responsibility of trying to get something like that approved by the committees and boards in your local church? First of all, the idea is too spectacular for most of us. Surely there must be a more conventional way to get that man to Jesus. Secondly, the plan called for the destruction of someone's personal property and made all who participated liable to legal action. Finally, no matter how you slice it, someone was going to have to fix the roof, and that seems like a pretty secular expenditure of money that was given for "spiritual" purposes. Thus we would have "saved the money," "saved the roof," and let the man go to hell!

The Priority of People

God owns every beast of the forest and the cattle upon a thousand hills. He has clear title to the universe with its vast treasures and indescribable wealth. The one thing, however, which means more to God than anything else is people.

God made the earth for people to enjoy. He created us in His own image and gave to us the privilege of enjoying an innumerable variety of fruits and vegetables. He expected us to have dominion over every beast, and every fowl, and every creature which creepeth upon the earth. He made the sun and the moon primarily for man and suspended the stars especially for us to see. Nothing in the entirety of the universe is more important than man.

"He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"
(Romans 8:32)

Never is the church more "on target" than when it invests in the betterment of man. Our first and foremost need is for salvation. But the Biblical concept of salvation is much broader than merely being saved for eternity. Man needs to be made whole in the here and now.

Jesus went about doing good. He healed the sick and made the blind to see. He was a companion to the lonely and a friend of publicans and sinners. He cared for little children and gave sympathy and concern to the bereaved. He fed the hungry and

provided guidance to those who were like sheep without a shepherd.

The church is His body. It is the temple of His Spirit. What Jesus began to do in the body, the body continues to do in Jesus. By so doing we display to the principalities and powers in heavenly places the manifold wisdom of God. Our fellow men behold our love and take knowledge of the fact that we have been with Jesus!

Questions for Discussion — Lesson Nine

1. One hundred years ago the church was at the focal point of all activity in the community. How did we lose that position?
2. Discuss the responsibility which the Christian has to do good unto all men but especially unto the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10)
3. Is the government today doing benevolent work which should be done by the church?
4. We know that churches sometimes sent money to Paul (II Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 4:15, etc.). Would it have been wrong for him to share this money with Luke the beloved physician or John Mark the attendant?
5. What does the Bible mean by "double honor" in I Timothy 5:17?
6. Phoebe was a servant of the church in Cenchrea and the Christians in Rome were instructed to help her in whatsoever business she had need of them. Would it have been wrong for her to be paid by the church?
7. Is it more "scriptural" to hire a Bible teacher than a secretary? Discuss!
8. Is it more important to hire a plumber to fix a broken toilet for the church or to hire a counselor to help mend a broken home?
9. At one time a man who "entered the ministry" took a vow of poverty and agreed never to marry. Was this good or bad?
10. Name at least one need in your church or your community which hiring additional personnel may help to solve.