

GRACE AS A PRINCIPLE OF NEW TESTAMENT MISSIONARY SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the business world, service normally results in expense, not financial increase, to the missionary. However, the assets for such service are unlimited, because they are God's. God owns it all, ". . .the world is Mine, and all that is in it." (Ps. 50:12; 24:1). The silver and gold are God's (Haggai 2:8). The world is God's by virtue of creation (Col. 1:16). "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (2 Cor. 9:8, quotations are from the NIV).

The problem is how to tap into God's resources. Many are the missionary fund-raising strategies. Seminars and books explain road-tested principles for raising support. There is "friend-raising." The focus is upon developing friends--serving people, and the outcome is often donors. One missionary related how he stayed up into the middle of the night primarily listening to the needs of hosts and showing genuine concern. The upshot, at the end of the vignette, was that two people became donors (*Wherever Magazine*, Winter, 1994). The motives of the missionary cannot be assailed, since any motives, beyond being of service, were not stated. But the method of serving people, it was noted, resulted in donors.

The writer attended a seminar years ago where this method of fund-raising was explicitly taught to missionaries. Those we serve do often become supporters, as the women who supported Jesus and the Twelve illustrate (Mark 15:41; Luke 8:3). But do we serve to receive? Are we friendly to fund? Amazing is the creativity in methodology: prayer cards dealt liberally, appeals for money as "prayer concerns" (it would at least appear). More about methods follows. The question is: "How are missionaries supported in the New Testament?" We are fortunate beyond telling that there is one document free of the world spirit, from which principles may potentially be gleaned. What does it say?

HOW WERE MISSIONARIES SUPPORTED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

So little is said--could it be that each had access to a manual for support raising that has been lost? Tacit assumptions seem to operate. We will need to look at deeper structures, rather than to a particular chapter and/or verse. The principle structures seem to be the grace of God and His providence. In that case, the document has not been lost--it is the New Testament.

Paul was launched on his famous first missionary journey not after doing deputation in Jerusalem, all Judea, and Tarsus. Probably not after his prayer letters were returned with "x"'s in the right places. Paul and Barnabus were "sent on their way by the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:4, the NIV is used throughout). What God begins, God completes. Does God give birth and not give delivery (Isaiah 66:9)? After the team returned, Luke records that they "had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed." (Acts 14:26). Yet there is no mention of Paul working on his first journey as a tentmaker (Glenn Cameron, *Tentmaking*

Pauline methodology in financing the spread of the Gospel, 1983). How was he "supported?" Silence.

Approaching potential donors for gifts is not necessarily wrong. But it must be done in faith. Certainly, whatever is *not* of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Faith may be greater to approach donors, than not to approach potential donors. Faith for one missionary may be naked unbelief to another. God at least *seems* to honor a variety of methods, but some of us, at least, have questions.

The impression that grace is an underlying principle comes also at the start of the second missionary journey, when Paul and Silas were "commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord." (Acts 15:40). Nothing was said about the church materially supporting Paul and Silas, although likely--at least to begin their journey. We do not hear of gifts sent later from the Antiochan church, as the case with the Philippian church. Later, Paul twice made requests for help on his way to the field, as he would pass through. He requested help of the Roman church on his way to Spain (Romans 15:24) and for help of the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:6) on his journey to an undetermined destination. He did ask Philemon to set up a guestroom for a visit, but this was a personal visit. These kinds of requests were for temporary help to get to a destination, rather than for ongoing support, as far as the text reveals. Christians were the "Seven Days Inn" for a missionary, as Paul's journey to Rome in Acts illustrates.

There is no record of Paul requesting even prayer support for his financial needs, although there were no lack of occasions. "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless." (1 Corinthians 4:11). He was considered "the scum of the earth" (1 Corinthians 4:13). He was "cold and naked," and had "often gone without food" (2 Corinthians 11:27). Yet Paul did not die of exposure or hunger. He had learned that it was Christ who enabled him to cope (Philippians 4:13).

WHAT IS KNOWN OF HOW MISSIONARIES WERE SUPPORTED?

Foundational is the concept that those who labor in the Gospel should be able to derive their income from the Gospel (1 Corinthians 9:4-14). The oxen that tread the grain must not be muzzled. If a person chooses not to pursue normal gainful employment for the sake of Christ, an "opportunity cost," then those who benefit from the teaching should provide a living. If a Christian worker is itinerant, then those believers in contact should provide temporary hospitality, including food and shelter. Jesus and the Twelve are illustrations. He accepted hospitality (Mark 3:20; 7:24). He encouraged the Twelve to seek out a worthy person, who would receive a prophet's or "righteous man's reward" (Matthew 10:11, 41). If there is an identity in purpose--matching a person willing to go, with a person willing to support--there is also an identity of reward. Both sacrifice, and God is no debtor. The same instructions were given to the Seventy-Two (Luke 10:5). Peter accepted hospitality (Acts 10:32). John reveals the righteousness of provisioning itinerant Christian workers, "You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God." (3 John 6b).

Paul received his help both from individual Christians and from groups of Christians (churches). One does not exclude the other. Paul accepted the financial assistance of Silas and Timothy, it appears (Acts 18:5) and help from Onesiphorus (2 Timothy 1:16). He also received funds from the churches of Macedonia (2 Corinthians 11:8-9). The Philippian church gave gifts "again and again when I was in need" (Philippians 4:16). Nothing was mentioned about how that church knew of those needs. Paul accepted the importunate Lydia's hospitality and a week's stay with the Christians at Tyre (Acts 16:15; 21:4).

However, on Paul's second and third missionary journeys Paul became a maker of tents in Thessalonica, Corinth (about 18 months) and in Ephesus (about two years--Cameron, 1983). He worked with Aquilla and Priscilla in Corinth (Acts 20:34), and worked alone (Acts 18:2). He described his tentmaking as "hard work" on several occasions (1 Corinthians 9:6), as he also mentioned that he worked "night and day" (2 Thessalonians 3:7f.). He did it for several reasons. At Thessalonica he even paid for his own food so that (1. he would not be a burden (1 Thessalonians 2:9) (2. he could demonstrate to that church that they ought not to be dependent upon others for their food (1 Thessalonians 4:12; 2 Thessalonians 3:7f.). His principle was "no work--no food." He had a right to support (1 Timothy 5:18), but sacrificed that right, as a principle of Christian liberty (Cameron, 1983). In Ephesus he worked with his hands to support not just himself, but also his companions (Acts 20:34-35). Paul's "rocky" support profile included self-employment. Did God provide customers? But ultimately his support was Rock solid.

The writer encountered several Gospel ministers who felt it was wrong to take a job to support himself or his family. One, whose family had had nothing to eat the night before, in an area extremely fertile for gardening, stated that working to support his family was giving Satan a victory. Satan was getting a victory, but at these points: not providing for his own family (1 Tim. 5:8), and the church failing to provide for her pastor. His church should have provided, and been taught to provide--perhaps the fruit of their gardens. But the bottom line is to provide for one's family. As God blesses, outside jobs may eventually be unnecessary.

GRACE AS A FOUNDATIONAL MISSION PRINCIPLE

The concept of grace is a whole circle of complementary segments. The grace of God has "various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).

"CHARISMATA"

God's administration of grace includes the gifting of persons for missions (Ephesians 3:2; Romans 12:6). These include "apostle," "prophet," and "evangelist" (Ephesians 4:7) and the important gift of "contributing" (Ephesians 4:8). Thus God equips those sent and the senders.

Interestingly, God's grace finds biblical support even to the equipping of an individual for a specific mission field, as Paul to the Gentiles (Romans 15:15f; Ephesians 3:8). "James, Peter and John recognized the grace given to me" to go to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:9).

Because the grace gifts are primarily for the edification of the Body of Christ for ministry, when a missionary is close to Christians, he or she is close to the grace of God. So when Paul and Silas were commended to God's grace, in part they were commended to what God would do through those who would become Christians (as the new convert Lydia, for example).

GRACE AS SUFFICIENT

Not only does God give gifts, but He gives diligence and energy for the enterprise. "By the grace of God I am what I am," laying a "foundation as an expert builder" (1 Corinthians 3:10). "I worked harder than them all," yet not him, "but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10). God's grace meant power, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). In fact, Paul "delighted" in weaknesses and hardships and difficulties (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Even more foundational is that none can be saved apart from God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:8-9; Titus 2:11). Unless that grace operates, our labors will not result in conversions. When our strenuous labors are complete, we still require an evaluation based on grace, for we are "unworthy servants" (Luke 17:10).

For all these reasons, we need to pray on the basis of God's grace to operate (1) in the missionary (2) in the unsaved (3) in the Christian community for support through its "giftedness" (4) for new missionaries to receive God's gifts and call to the harvest fields.

GRACE AND GIVING

The Macedonian church is a superlative example of God's grace in giving. That grace "welled up in rich generosity," so that they "gave beyond their ability". This oxymoron is explained in that they first gave themselves to God, and then to "us" by God's will (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). God directed some resources from one person/group of persons to another. God's resources are unlimited and he distributes them as He will. "God is able to make all grace abound to you, having all you need. You will abound in every good work. . ." (2 Corinthians 9:8). "Their hearts will go out to you because of the surpassing *grace* God has given you." (2 Corinthians 9:14). He "supplied seed to the sower" for a rich "harvest of righteousness." The Corinthians were admonished to "excel in this *grace of giving*." The "grace of Christ" resulted in His giving to the point of becoming poor (1 Corinthians 8:7).

Perhaps the best illustration is that of the first church, that at Jerusalem. "**Great** grace was upon them," which had the effect that "they shared everything" (Acts 4:32). God lays burdens for one upon the spirit of another. Titus and Paul were both burdened for the Corinthians' needs (2 Corinthians 8:16). The point is that God is able, and biblically **does** burden Christians to meet the needs of other Christians. Could it be that one of the most effective support-raising strategies would be to ask God to "burden" people to meet specific missionary needs? Those

who will be most attuned to God's voice will be those who have first given themselves to the Lord.

The writer's experience includes those who have given support and who have admitted that they didn't know why. It also includes those who wanted to give, but were unable for a variety of reasons. We also must pray that God will give the "opportunity." The Philippians had a "concern" (burden), but at times no "opportunity" to give (Phil. 4:10). Most donors have a limited "burden," so that even when able, even when they express an unsolicited desire to give more--and are clearly able--for some reason they do not. It's not unreasonable, then, to pray for God to protect the income sources of donors. God also seems to lift a burden from one and give one to another. He may take away a burden entirely, then renew it. Perhaps God keeps the support package fluid, so that the missionary will not look to the donor list, but to God.

ADVOCATES

Paul became the advocate to stir Christians to meet needs of suffering believers in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-4). He organized the accumulation of funds through regular offerings, the delivery of funds, and then later chastened the Corinthians for not fulfilling their intentions (2 Cor. 8:10-11). Paul could boldly challenge the Corinthians in part because the funds would not accrue to him. God moved David to fund and motivate others to provide funds and leadership for building His temple (1 Chronicles 22).

God not only burdens Christians to give, but to become fundraisers for a particular ministry. The advocate may not be personally close, but God nevertheless burdens the person to see that the needs for that ministry or Kingdom project are met. It is wise to ask God to create an advocate for the Kingdom project in your hands.

SUPPORT "EX NIHILO"

The God who feeds the 5,000, the sparrows and who clothes the lilies is well able to watch over His Kingdom ambassadors. He promised that as we go, Christ will be with us (Matthew 28:18-29). One could liken that to a king escorting an emissary everywhere in his considerable kingdom. Would the king be embarrassed to not be able to house, feed and if needed, clothe this guest? Divine economics do not require ledgers. Where did the loaves and fish originate (Matthew 14:19-21)? Or the wine at Cana (John 2:7-11) and the flour and oil for the widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 18:12-16)? Is this a *closed* system into which God cannot inject His resources? What did the Twelve lack or the Seventy-two when they were sent out "on faith" (Luke 9:2-5; 10:4-7)? Note that Luke 22:35-36 countermands the instructions regarding taking no provisions, given in Luke 11, so that missionaries are not required to go with one set of clothing, etc. Taking no money was illustrative perhaps of how God will provide, but is not normative today. However, the experience of training of "Brother Andrew" in an English missionary training school was indeed helpful. He was given a sum of money, expected to hold meetings, rent halls, support himself, and return with the same amount of money! He did (*God's Smugglers*). The main requirement is that we seek first

God's kingdom and righteousness, and food, drink and clothing come into the bargain (Matthew 6:33f).

PRAYER AND SUPPORT

The principle of prayer is crucial for missionary support by "grace." We are to "ask," "seek," and "knock" (Matthew 7:9f.). Agreeing in prayer is needed regarding finances (Matthew 18:19), particularly between husband and wife. The missionary George Müller illustrates these principles. He determined in his life to demonstrate that God could support His work without recourse to appeals made to people. He was enabled to maintain 2,000 orphans in homes that he built on Ashley Down in Bristol, England from 1832 onward. If a potential donor approached him, as often happened, inquiring as to whether or not financial assistance was needed, his one answer was that he had determined to let his requests be made to God alone. Reading *George Muller of Bristol*, by A.T. Pierson is to follow an almost incredible faith journey. At times "food" would be blessed without food on hand, but never once was a meal missed for all his orphans. When asked how he could stand the burden of feeding, housing, clothing and educating so many children, he replied,

By the *grace* of God, this is no cause of anxiety to me. These children I have years ago cast upon the Lord. The whole work is His and it becomes me to be without carefulness. In whatever parts I am lacking in this point I am able by the *grace* of God to roll the burden upon my heavenly Father. (Pierson, 144, emphases supplied)

Müller had five prayer principles: (1) depend on the merit of Jesus Christ alone for his petitions (2) be separate from any known sin (3) to maintain faith in God's promises (4) to ask according to God's will (5) to pray with importunity (Pierson). He at first agreed in prayer with only his wife and a few close workers, but later expanded this circle to those who were employed at the orphanages (not to "supporters"). So careful was he not to reveal needs that in one year he withheld the annual report, which minutely detailed the accounts of the work, so as *not* to reveal the current financial pressures that they faced. And those pressures did not diminish with time. Some of the greatest trials were encountered after decades of ministry. Again, the primary purpose of his life was not to minister to thousands of orphans or to distribute Christian literature or to support other missionaries, all of which he did. It was to demonstrate that God can and will provide for His work. It was, it may be said, successful.

Incidentally, Müller took a vow of poverty, so that he did not build up personal wealth. Whatever came through would not stick to his hands. If the book by Pierson is at all accurate, detractors of Müller--even those who say that Müller came up with the first "prayer letter" to solicit funds--ought to be humiliated when they meet him.

HOW, THEN, SHALL MISSIONARIES LIVE?

Jonathan Bonk, in his book *Missions and Money: Affluence as a western missionary problem* (Orbis Books, 1991), has shown the intercultural difficulties created by the wealth of Western missionaries in impoverished countries. Money

often creates distance between the missionary and the poor, among missionaries themselves and between missionaries and national believers. This is not absolutely so, since the gospel has taken root and sometimes flourished around the Third World, proclaimed by missionaries extremely wealthy compared to their host cultures.

Bonk, however, has pointed out the dissonance between messenger and message, when missionaries are outfitted to the point of the minimization of difficulties and inconveniences. The avoidance of privation seems to run contrary to the message of taking up one's cross daily, and also of identifying with the poor incarnationally, if the poor is the target audience. The average annual support for World Council of Churches-related denominational missionaries is approximately \$52,000 (1996). One of those denominations recently requested of its constituency \$100,000. each for five missionary couples/individuals as a startup cost. One individual was *already on the field*. Bonk wonders aloud, "Do missionaries do good to do well?" Other missions, such as Worldwide Evangelistic Crusade (WEC) don't ask missionaries to raise a specific support level. That is between the missionary and God. This seems to be a scriptural approach, allowing God to determine the needs, and fund the missionary. Bonk also calls for a simpler missionary lifestyle. The lives of Paul and Jesus demonstrate that life.

At the minimum, the life of the missionary should display no greed (Luke 12:15), and demonstrate carrying one's cross (Luke 14:27), and giving up all that God requires of that missionary (Luke 14:33). Perhaps one's living should be related to the target audience, but not completely, if serving the poor, since one must have resources to be able to give. When a missionary lives on what God provides, then that level is right, whatever it is.

CHRISTIAN MARKETING

Do phone-a-thons run by Christian institutions put other Christians "under compulsion" to give (2 Cor. 9:7) by asking, then-and-there, for a specific amount of money? How spiritual is it to offer the ones calling financial bonuses per hour for the amounts of money raised? Would Paul have taken pledges for the number of sermons preached, or the Twelve for how many miles walked? One youth group took pledges for dancing all night. The writer attended a free banquet where the entire audience was expected to fill in line-by-line, lock-stepped, a donation card, putting peer pressure upon all at the table not to appear stingy. Yes, notice was given that an offering would be taken--but in this pressured manner? All this will perhaps have one of four effects: (1) people will not give, losing the blessing of giving more (2) their sensitivity level to appeals will harden so that increasingly strident methods must be used (3) those who do not clamor for funds won't be noticed (4) those who don't clamor for funds *might* be noticed. Why not "fund lowering," instead of so much fund "raising?"

CONTENTMENT

Contentment is needed. Paul, as he traveled thousands of miles, "with no *visible* means of support," visiting untold numbers of homes, could say that he did not covet anyone's silver, gold or clothing (Acts 20:33; 2 Corinthians 12:14). With food

and clothing we are to be content (1 Timothy 6:8). At times he didn't even have the minimums (2 Corinthians 11:27). But he could endure all privations because of his personal fellowship with Christ (Philippians 4:13). God was enough for Paul, and he didn't die of exposure or starvation. God was enough for Habakkuk, as the Babylonians approached (Habakkuk 3:16-19). Is God enough for us a Western missionary? The emphasis need not be upon the donors, upon individuals (friends) or churches, but upon God, who owns everything under the heavens (Psalm 51:11-12). The God who says that the one who trusts in the arm of flesh is accursed (Jeremiah 17:5), also says, "Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it." (Psalm 81:10)--guiding verses for Müller--and hopefully for us.

Jim Sutherland 8/10/99