

Helping Needy Saints

M. W. Bassford, 5-29-11

As we all know, brethren, life can be a very uncertain thing, and people who were getting by just fine one day may be plunged into disaster the next day. We saw this happen last month with the surge of tornadoes that passed through Alabama and other parts of the South. The pictures of the destruction were all over the TV and all over the Internet, and we would have to have a heart of stone not to be moved by the plight of those poor, suffering people. It's not like they're destitute because they wasted their money on booze and gambling. They're destitute because they were going along, doing the best they could, and all of a sudden, a tornado came up and destroyed everything they owned.

When we hear and see heart-wrenching stories of tragedy like that, our natural impulse is to want to help. Up here, we've been spared that level of destruction, so we want to do what we can to help those poor souls down South put their lives back together. It may be that many of the members of this congregation have already sent help on an individual basis to help the tornado victims, and if so, I commend you. That's a righteous act. In addition to that, the elders here have decided that it is also appropriate for the church here to send financial assistance, and today is the day they have chosen for a special collection. The entire contribution this Sunday is going to be earmarked for tornado relief.

However, in this, as in any situation where we're using church resources, we must be extremely careful to ensure that we're using these funds in the right way. Although the elders lead us here, this isn't the elders' church. It's the Lord's church, and that means that we must use the resources of the church according to His will. In our zeal to help, it would be very easy for us to go beyond what has been written. Let's consider, then, the Scriptural rules on helping needy saints.

The Individual and the Church.

When we explore this topic, we must first consider the contrast between the way that an individual may rightly use his money and the way that a church may rightly use the Lord's money. This contrast begins with the concept of **PERSONAL OWNERSHIP**. Peter explains what this means in Acts 5:3-4. In context, Peter has just caught a disciple named Ananias lying about his contribution to the church. He sold some property, kept some of the proceeds for himself, but gave the rest to the church while claiming that he had given the full amount. What Peter is asking Ananias about here is why he lied about it. It would have been completely in Ananias's rights to keep part of the sale price, give the rest, and say, "This is just part of the sale price. I kept some of the money for myself." Ananias could have done that because it was his property and his money. Because it was his, he could do whatever he wanted with it.

In the same way, friends, our money and our property belong to us, and we can do whatever we want with them, provided, of course that the use isn't sinful. We have the right to buy whatever kind of house we want, whatever kind of car we want, whatever kind of TV we want, or just hold on to the money for something else, and God's word doesn't place any restriction on those things. God gave the money to us, so it's ours to use and enjoy.

Of course, the Scripture does exhort us to use our money in **DOING GOOD**. Let's look together at Galatians 6:10. Part of being a disciple of Jesus is looking for opportunities to do good and help others. We could help them with our time, we could help them with our labor, or we could help them with our money. When we're making these decisions about whom to help, we should pay special attention to the needs of other Christians, but it's perfectly acceptable for us to use our money to help anyone, whether inside or outside the church. Once again, the money's ours, and we can do what we want with it. If we want to send a donation to Florida College, that's fine. If we want to donate to the National ALS Foundation, that's fine too. For that matter, if we want to cut a check for a non-Christian friend who's down on his luck, we have every right to do that. God places no restrictions on the way we can do good as individuals.

Just about everybody who claims to be a believer would agree with that, but here's the part where a lot of people stray from the path. They see **THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE CHURCH** as having the same freedom, so the church is also free to use church resources for whatever it wants to do. That is not true. In fact, the Scripture explicitly makes the distinction between church and individual in 1 Timothy 5:16. If some Christian had a needy widow in his family, he was commanded to financially support that widow. However, the church was forbidden from helping her, because she had relatives who should have been doing the job already. What the individual was required to do, the church was required not to do. This illustrates the general rule that the church is much more limited in spending money than an individual is. Just because we can use our money to help someone doesn't mean that we can assume the church can too.

Logically speaking, this rule makes a great deal of sense, because the funds at the disposal of the church are **THE LORD'S MONEY**. David makes this clear in his prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:14. When we give money to the Lord, it stops being ours and it becomes His. Just like we get to do what we want with our money, God gets to do what He wants with His money. We might forget this because we're the ones who control the checkbook for the church bank account, but that just makes us stewards, not owners. God has entrusted His money to us like we might entrust our money to the

bank, but we don't become the owners of His money any more than the bank becomes the owner of our money. We only get to use His money in the ways that he has authorized. Anything beyond that is forbidden.

Some well-meaning church leaders get mixed up on this, they forget that the Lord's money isn't theirs to spend as they please, and they start using that money in all kinds of ways that aren't found in Scripture. Brethren, let me tell you what that would be like. That would be like our bank deciding that we needed a new car, taking money out of our bank account, and using it to buy that car without our permission. If my bank did that to me, I wouldn't care how badly I needed a new car, I wouldn't care how nice the car was, and I wouldn't care how great a deal the bank got. I would still be furious with the bank because they didn't have the right to spend my money without my say-so. It's no different with God. If we want to spend His money, we'd better have his say-so. Otherwise, we're making Him angry.

Helping Needy Saints.

As with anything else, we learn what God does and does not want His money spent on from a study of His word, and what the Scripture teaches us is that church funds are to be used to help needy Christians only. This helping the needy begins with **OUR LOCAL CHURCH**. We see a good example of the Scriptural pattern here in Acts 4:34-35. In the first-century Jerusalem church, there were Christians who needed financial aid for whatever reason. Here's the way those needs were addressed: Other Christians who were better off than the needy got money, in this case by selling property and gave it to the church by bringing it to the apostles. Then, the apostles used the church treasury thus established to relieve the sufferings of the poor Christians by giving to them according to their needs.

This is a pattern that we can and must follow today. Like those devout men and women of old, we contribute to the church treasury, whether from sale of property or from our regular income. Then, the leaders of the church assess the needs of the members of the church. If they think someone needs help, they distribute from the treasury accordingly.

It's equally important, though, to note what is absent from the Scriptural record. In every case, only needy saints receive help from the church, and neither here nor anywhere else do we see church funds being used to relieve the suffering of the non-Christian poor. Because God hasn't told us that He wants His money used in that way, we can't use His money in that way. We don't have the right to decide for Him. Church resources are only for church members.

However, we do have examples of church money being used for needy saints **ELSEWHERE**. One of the most enlightening instances of this in Scripture begins in Acts 11:27-29. Like every other instance of benevolence, this one begins with a need. The prophet Agabus comes to the church in Antioch and informs them that a great famine is about to occur. Apparently, this famine is going to be especially severe in the region of Judea. When the famine does take place, the Christians in Antioch resolve that they are going to send help to the brethren in Judea.

Once again, it's easy to see how we should follow this example in our relief efforts as a church. First of all, we learn of a need. The Christians in Antioch were told of a famine; we have been told of devastating tornadoes. Second, in response to that need, we resolve to help our brethren in the afflicted area. The Christians in Antioch decided to send money to the Christians in Judea; we have decided to send money to the Christians in Alabama. Because God was pleased with our brethren who did this long ago, we can be certain that He will be pleased with us when we do the same.

Our adherence to this Scriptural pattern should continue through **THE DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES**. We learn how the Christians in Antioch handled this from Acts 11:30. They entrusted the money to trustworthy messengers, in this case Barnabas and Saul. These messengers traveled to Judea and put the money in the hands of the elders of the churches in Judea. Then, those elders distributed the money to meet the needs of the Judean Christians.

I've actually seen this pattern in operation before. In 2005, when I was still a member of the Dowlen Rd. church in Beaumont, Hurricane Rita swept through the town and wrecked much of it, including the homes of many of the members of the church. Over the next few weeks, churches all over the country sent money to the eldership of the church. The elders then handed that money out to afflicted brethren, according to the needs that they saw. As we look to help alleviate the suffering in Alabama, this is the pattern that we will follow too. Rather than trying to find individual Christians in need of help, we will get in touch with elders of churches with needy members. After we've extensively checked out the bona fides of those elders, we will send them the money, to be used as they see fit. The practicality of this arrangement should be obvious. Unlike traditional charitable contributions, there is absolutely no overhead. Every dime we give will go to a Christian who needs help. Second, the elders there will be able to separate the genuine Christians from the frauds, where we might not be able to. The Scriptural model is both reassuring and wise.

Within this model, though, we do have latitude concerning **METHOD OF COLLECTION**. As we saw a moment ago, the saints in Antioch used a one-time collection to accumulate funds to help the saints in Judea endure the famine. We see another method employed in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. Here, the problem is very similar—there are brethren in Jerusalem who need financial help. However, rather than a one-time collection, Paul urges the Corinthian church to set aside money each Lord's day, to make sure that the money would be available when he did arrive. In our case, the elders have chosen to use the one-time method, but the other approach would have been equally acceptable to the Lord.