

Using the Church Treasury

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Even though God has commanded His people to be at peace and united, historically speaking, the devil has usually not had much trouble causing division in the church. The tools that he uses in this task are quite varied. Sometimes, he employs personality differences between brothers to create a split. At other times, he sends false teachers in to lead the people astray in matters of righteousness and salvation. Interestingly enough, though, his favorite tool isn't either one of these things. His favorite tool is disputes about how church money should be used.

In the Lord's church since the Restoration, there have been two gigantic brotherhood-wide church splits, divisions that caused untold bitterness and cost untold numbers of souls. Both of them were about money. The first, which occurred about a hundred years ago now, had to do with larger, richer churches embracing missionary societies and instrumental music. That's when the churches of Christ parted ways with the Christian Church and the Disciples of Christ. The second split, which took place about fifty years ago, arose because of churches that wished to support colleges and orphans' homes and build kitchens and eating places in their church buildings. Nobody changed the name on the sign over this one, but it led to a division between institutional and non-institutional churches to this day.

Brethren, we can confidently expect that if Satan has had so much success with an approach in the past, he's not going to abandon it now. It may not happen now, or ten years from now, but sooner or later, he's going to use money issues to sow strife among God's people again. We can also expect that he's going to use a pragmatic argument to do it. In other words, somebody's going to get the bright idea that they can improve the success of the Lord's work by using money in a way that the Bible does not mention. When we're confronted with such an argument, we must rely not on our wisdom, but on the word to determine what's right. Let's look at what the Bible says about using the church treasury.

The Work of the Church.

We can't really explore this issue without first understanding the work of the church. It's neatly summed up for us in a verse we looked at in the most recent sermon in this series, 1 Timothy 3:15. The purpose of the local church is to support and promote the truth. Furthermore, because the local church has been given this mission by God, we can be certain that it is adequate to carry out that mission. Under the guidance of its elders, it is able to proclaim the gospel as widely and loudly as it needs to be proclaimed. There is no need for the church to send its money to some sort of worldwide missionary society to make sure that the gospel can travel to the corners of the globe. There is no need for one church to send money to a second church so that the second church can carry out the work of the first. Local churches, acting under the Lord's direction, are all that is necessary. Nor is that all. In addition to being unnecessary, missionary societies, sponsoring churches, and the like are also outside of the realm of Scripture. The Bible never so much as hints at the existence of such things in the first century, and the silence of the Scripture means that they are forbidden.

However, there are a number of different things that the local church may do to carry out its mission. The Scripture describes local churches in the first century **SUPPORTING PREACHERS**. Look with me at Philippians 4:14-16. Here, the apostle Paul is describing his ongoing relationship with the church in Philippi. During his missionary journeys, the brethren there regularly sent him funds so that he could continue his work. Today, churches may do the same thing. We can legitimately use the church treasury to support a preacher who works with our congregation, or we can use it to support a preacher who works elsewhere. In fact, at the present time, the church in Joliet does both. I am supported so that I can carry out my work in this area, and we send money every month to preachers in other places for their support. Notice, though, that although the New Testament has several examples of men receiving money from churches so that they can preach, we never see an example of a church sending money to some evangelistic organization. That sort of thing was never contemplated by the first-century church, and it's not a practice we should follow either.

Likewise, the local church is also tasked with **MAKING ASSEMBLY POSSIBLE**. We see that we are commanded to assemble together as a church in Hebrews 10:25. We know that the first-century Christians assembled in a variety of different places. In the book of Acts alone, we see them meeting together on the grounds of the temple, in synagogues, on riverbanks, in philosophical schools, and in upper rooms. Clearly, there is no one location where a church is required to meet. It is only required to meet together. Today, we have the same requirement. However, as a congregation, we're so large that no member here has a house that could contain our assembly. The climate of Chicago makes it impossible for us to meet outdoors year-round. It's hard to imagine that some building owner around here would allow us to meet regularly in his building free of charge. And yet, we are still commanded to meet. That leaves us with only one alternative: using church funds to buy or rent a meeting place. Thankfully, the church here has owned this building long enough that we aren't making payments on it anymore, but maintaining it still requires a regular outlay of money. So that we can continue to meet here, we can legitimately use the Lord's money to that purpose.

In a different arena, we also see church funds employed in **HELPING NEEDY SAINTS**. An example of this conduct appears in Acts 11:29-30. In context, the church in Antioch has just received the prophet Agabus, who has warned of a coming famine, which did in fact occur. Apparently, the brethren in Antioch were better off than the saints in Judea, so the church in Antioch resolves to send money to the Judean churches. They use Paul and Barnabas as messengers, and the two men distribute the relief funds to the elders of the various churches in the affected area. Today, churches may follow this same pattern. When I was living in Beaumont, Texas, back in 2005, the area was devastated by Hurricane Rita. In the weeks after the hurricane, the Dowlen Road church, of which I was a member, received funds from several dozen churches to be used for hurricane relief. The elders used those funds to help Christians who had suffered, helping one widow replace her roof here, helping a family deal with the tree in their living room there. Likewise, if a member of a church reaches a point of financial need, that church may use its own funds to help that member out. The church here has done this more than once since I've been here. That's the Biblical model for church benevolence.

Unauthorized Works.

However, just as there are some things that the church is authorized to do, there are many things that it is not authorized to do. They are outside its mission of supporting the truth, and so they are not permissible. Due to time constraints, we can only focus on some of the most common offenders in this category. The first of these is **CHURCH-SPONSORED MEALS**. We know, of course, that the church building is just a building. There is nothing holy about it; there is nothing wrong with eating in it per se. However, when the church starts spending money on food, or on facilities to eat in, that's when the problem appears. First of all, the times when we assemble together are times when we are to feed our souls, not our bodies. Look at Paul's comments about this in 1 Corinthians 11:22, 34. In context, Paul is addressing the way that the Corinthian church was abusing the Lord's Supper, but his description of the proper place for eating is quite revealing. He tells the Corinthians that their houses are for eating and drinking in, not the place of assembly. Likewise, he says that if anyone is hungry, he is to eat at home. The Lord's Supper was meant to be a memorial, not a meal, and the assembly was to be a place for worshiping God, not for feasting. When eating together, as pleasant as it may be, is so clearly not a work of the church, the church cannot use its treasury to support it.

Furthermore, just as we've seen elsewhere, the kitchen and dining room on the church grounds are not just unauthorized. They are also unnecessary. Look at the record of first-century Christians eating together in Acts 2:46. These brethren loved each other so much and wanted to be around each other so much that they ate their meals together daily. In this, they weren't the least bit hindered by not having any kind of building at all. Instead, they showed hospitality. They invited one another into their homes and ate together that way. We can do just the same thing today, and in this congregation, we do often eat together outside of the assembly. When that spirit of love exists in a church, there is no need for a fellowship hall. When that spirit of love does not exist, a fellowship hall won't solve the problem.

Just as churches often go astray in sponsoring eating in the building, they often run into problems with **GENERAL BENEVOLENCE**. We've already seen that the church may engage in specific benevolence by helping needy saints. However, it's a different matter entirely for the church to use its money to assist the poor who are not Christians. We never see any authority in the Bible anywhere for such a practice. No church in New Testament times is ever recorded as giving money to help some poor person who was not a disciple. As a result, whenever someone calls the building during the week asking for money, unless they claim to be a member of the church, I tell them that we don't have funds to help them. That's the only way that we can follow God's plan for what the church is supposed to be.

To some, this might seem hard-hearted. They might ask, "Wouldn't Jesus want us to help all those poor, suffering people?" Well, yes He would. However, that help is supposed to come not from the church, but from the individual Christian. Look at James 1:27. The first thing we need to recognize about this passage is that many wrongly use it to justify sending church funds to orphans' homes and other such institutions. They say, "Look! It's pure and undefiled religion to help widows and orphans, so the church can use its money to do it!" The problem with that argument is that this passage is clearly talking not about the church, but about the individual. That's why it continues on to say "and keep *oneself* unspotted by the world". Churches don't have selves. Only people do. However, in this verse, we must also recognize our individual responsibility to help. When we see people in need, whoever they are, we need to be soft-hearted and generous in our dealings with them. God expects that from Christians, but not from churches.

The next argument that the defender of church support for orphans' homes will make is that anything the individual can do, the church can do. In the first place, this argument is preposterous on its face. We don't have to think very long before we come up with all sorts of things the individual can do that the church can't. I can get married and have children. Can the Joliet church? Second, the Bible explicitly makes the distinction between individual and church benevolence in 1 Timothy 5:16. Here, the individual is allowed and indeed commanded to support needy relatives. However, the purpose of this support is so that the church will not be burdened. If the church is not to be burdened with the support of even these Christian widows, how much more must it not be burdened with the world's poor!