



# SHOULD MINISTRY BE FREE?

CONLEY OWENS

Billions of dollars change hands in the name of Christ. Christian book sales climb into the hundreds of millions of dollars, Seminaries often collect tuition upwards of \$60,000 for a standard degree, and even small-dollar transactions impose their own heavy burdens. For example, church leaders exhaust countless hours wrestling to understand and purchase the appropriate licenses to worship music in order to accommodate the needs of their congregation. Certainly, money fuels the work of ministry, and the worker is worthy of his wages (1 Tim. 5:18), but at what point does the financial enterprise go too far?

The modern church lacks the moral parameters necessary to identify ethical transgressions in ministry fundraising. Of course, who wouldn't object to the money-grubbing solicitations of prosperity gospel preachers and aberrant televangelists? But our judgment must extend beyond the ability to detect the most egregious infractions. In a context where biblical discernment is limited, ministry leaders operate without guidance or real accountability. Now, more than ever, the church must turn to the word of God to find wisdom on these matters and develop the clarity required for true discernment.

## The Command of Christ

As Jesus sends out the disciples, he says the following.

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. (Matt. 10:8–10)

To “give without pay” appears to conflict with the idea that “the laborer deserves his food.” Should the laborer receive wages or not? Typical resolutions to this question decide that it actually *is* okay to receive pay, just as long as it's not *too much* pay. Jesus has something else in mind.

The primary concern of Matthew 10:8–10 is not *what* is received, or *how* it is received, but *from whom* it is received. The disciples are *not* to receive from those to whom they minister. They *are* to receive from God. The key to all this is found in the word “laborer.” Consider the immediate context:

Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord

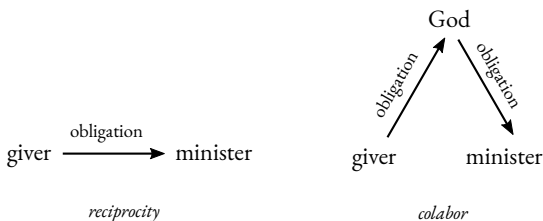
of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Matt. 9:37–38; cf. Luke 10:2)

The employer of the laborers pays their wages. In this metaphor, the employer is “the Lord of the harvest,” not the grain. That is, God pays the wages, not the recipients of ministry. He may use the grain to pay his servants, but ultimately their reward comes from his hand. This stands in stark contrast to the idea that “the laborer is worthy of his wages” means those who receive the gospel must offer payment as employers or clients. Such a conclusion mistakes the grain for God, the harvest for its Lord.

According to their commission, the disciples are not at liberty to give their ministry in return for payment, but in the course of ministry they may receive support that God has furnished at the hands of men.

How do we articulate the difference between horizontal payment from man to minister and vertical payment from the Lord to his laborer? The key here is in the notion of *obligation*. In a purely horizontal exchange, a man finds himself obligated to a minister. In a contribution representing a vertical payment from God, the giver offers out of obligation to God. We will call these two sorts of transactions *ministerial reciprocity* and *ministerial labor*.

Jesus forbids *ministerial reciprocity* in Matthew 10:8 when he commands his disciples to “give without pay.” On the other hand, he permits and even promotes *ministerial labor* in Matthew 10:9–10 when he instructs the disciples not to bring their own provisions because “the laborer deserves his food.”



## The Policy of Paul

If you have not previously investigated the matter of ministry fundraising, the frequency with which Paul addresses the topic may astound you. Beyond those texts regarding the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, major selections include the entirety of 1 Corinthians 9, 2 Corinthians 11:1–15, 1 Thessalonians 2:9–12, 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12, and Philippians 4:10–20. There is no shortage of Pauline passages that have some bearing on ministry finance. When we look at these passages, we find that Paul adopts the exact same pattern Jesus set for his disciples.

In 1 Corinthians 9 and 2 Corinthians 11, Paul explains that he refuses to preach for pay. He lists a variety of reasons *why* he does this, but these reasons may not overturn the simple *what* of his actions. In both of these passages, the apostle provides a direct description of his policy: to *preach the gospel free of charge*.

What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. (1 Cor. 9:18)

Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? (2 Cor. 11:7)

Simply stated, Paul rejects reciprocity, all that is offered in direct exchange for his work of ministry.

Many assume that Paul refuses Corinthian funds to preserve his own independence. By accepting their money, he would implicitly grant them the status of patron, obligating himself to them. However, as frequently as this motivation is assumed, Paul never intimates it. In fact, a host of problems prohibit this understanding, not the least of which is that Paul's epistles do not indicate that the Corinthians seek to have some status over Paul, but that they seek to have some status *under* him.

Despite his commitments, the apostle Paul does not reject financial support altogether, even in the context of his gospel preaching. For example, in both Corinthian epistles, he speaks of his intentions to come to Corinth in order to be sent by them to Macedonia.

I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. (1 Cor. 16:5–6)

I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. (2 Cor. 1:16)

The word for “help” and “send” in these verses is the Greek word *propempe*, a term with financial overtones. For example, when Paul commands Titus to *propempe* Zenas and Apollos, he is to do so “seeing that they lack nothing” (Titus 3:13).

Such support is not reciprocity, but colabor. The one who helps a missionary reach his destination does not give out of obligation to the minister, but to God who has commissioned him.

If Paul permanently refuses Corinthian support, yet also plans to accept it, there is an apparent contradiction. However, we can resolve this discrepancy by recognizing that while Paul resolutely opposes the reciprocity of Corinthian payment, *propempe* support more naturally falls under the rubric of colabor.

## The Judgment of John

In perhaps the clearest Scriptural instance of colabor, the apostle John argues that Gaius should send out (*propempe*) noble missionaries “that we may be fellow workers for the truth” (3 John 8).

You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. (3 John 6b–8)

Here in this epistle, John identifies the act of giving to such men as colabor, establishing a relationship between “fellow workers.” This instruction complements the command in his previous epistle not to partner in the wicked works of false teachers by accepting them into one’s home—that is, providing support in the form of room and board (2 John 10–11).

However, more significant to our investigation, John explains what makes these missionaries honorable: “they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.” Going out for the sake of the name and accepting nothing from the Gentiles are not two independent accolades. No conjunction distinguishes the two; they must

be recognized as linked. Their placement in immediate proximity suggests that they are to be viewed as roughly equivalent statements, accepting nothing being the sum proof that these men have gone out for the sake of the name. That is, the fact that they do not take money demonstrates their sincerity, a lack of ulterior motives.

The term “Gentiles” does not primarily denote ethnicity, but a status outside the kingdom of God. John commends the financial support of missionaries from the church in an act of colabor, but implicitly condemns as duplicitous the reciprocity that would necessarily characterize a financial gift from unbelievers.

## **The Faith of the Fathers**

The fact that the early church rejected ministerial reciprocity and encouraged ministerial colabor may also be seen in early extra-biblical Christian writings. Consider the words of the *Didache*, written sometime in the first century.

Let every apostle, when he cometh to you, be received as the Lord; but he shall not abide more than a single day, or if there be need, a second likewise; but if he abide three days, he is a false prophet. And when he departeth let the apostle receive nothing save bread, until he findeth shelter; but if he ask money, he is a false prophet. (*Didache* 11.4–6)

This ethic appears also in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a second-century writing that was highly regarded by the church.

[One who has a false spirit] receiveth money for his prophesying, and if he receiveth not, he prophesieth not. Now can a divine Spirit receive money and prophesy? It is not possible for a prophet of God to do this, but the spirit of such prophets is earthly. (*Shepherd* 43.12)

Similarly, Apollonius of Ephesus, a Christian who lived at the turn of the third century, contested against the false teachers of a heretical movement.

Does not all Scripture seem to you to forbid a prophet to receive gifts and money? When therefore I see the prophetess receiving gold and silver and costly garments, how can I avoid reproving her? ... If they deny that their prophets

have received gifts, let them acknowledge this: that if they are convicted of receiving them, they are not prophets. (Eusebius, History 5.18.4, 11)

Many years later, the Protestant Reformation would be sparked by the sale of indulgences, essentially the exchange of money for spiritual benefit. In our present time this ethic has fallen by the wayside, and there is need for continued Reformation.

## Conclusion

What do we take away from all this? One should not exchange money for any activity that proclaims the gospel or directly attends to its proclamation. It is not merely an issue of requiring money; even accepting reciprocity for the gospel compromises the sincerity of ministry.

While we don't have the space to address each of these in this small pamphlet, consider how this ethic should apply to the following:

- Bible translations
- Devotional or doctrinal literature
- Preaching for weddings and funerals
- Biblical counseling
- Conference speaking
- Seminary tuition

These things should be funded by partners rather than by customers. Such a change would not only align with the Bible's commands, but also enliven the giver. Are you more excited to pay bills or make an investment? When ministers receive colobor over reciprocity, they give fellow believers a chance to invest in the most wonderful work of all: the gospel.

The prophet Isaiah described salvation as water that is offered "without money and without price" (Isa. 55:1). Later, Jesus explained he is the source of that living water (John 7:37). On the final pages of Scripture, John recorded the repeated assertion that the Lord offers this water freely (Rev. 21:6; 22:17). As we consider the relationship between money and ministry, there is nothing less at stake than the proper advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“... no man will be a sincere minister of [God’s] word or dispenser of his grace, till he is prepared to bestow his labor gratuitously”

—**John Calvin**

“As we see, every project of men bears money; the Word of God bears nothing but the cross.”

—**Martin Luther**

“There is no buying and selling of any sort in the things of God.”

—**Tertullian**

*“Its heads give judgment for a bribe;  
its priests teach for a price;  
its prophets practice divination for money;  
yet they lean on the Lord and say,  
‘Is not the Lord in the midst of us?  
No disaster shall come upon us.’”*

—**Micah**

*Want to learn more about the Bible’s view of money and ministry?  
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