

# Should Pastors Be Salaried?

A Closer Look At A Popular Tradition

---

by Darryl M. Erkel (1997)

Originally posted @ <http://www.5solas.org/media.php?id=88>

Historically, pastors during the first-century period were normally not paid on a full-time basis. Although they may have periodically received gifts of food, clothing, and even some monetary assistance at times, there is no historical evidence to suggest that such pastors were given a full-time salary sufficient to meet their financial needs and obligations. This is confirmed by the following considerations:

1. Most of the congregations were too poor to financially support a full-time pastor, not to mention a plurality of pastors which is the New Testament pattern (Acts 14:23; 20:17,28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 13:17; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-4). In some cases, they were even too poor to support an apostle or assist other churches who were suffering (1 Thessalonians 2:9; Philippians 4:10-15).

2. Even though Paul, as an apostle, had the right to financial support (1 Corinthians 9:6-7,14), he repeatedly established a pattern of not asking or demanding money from the churches which he served. He did this for a variety of reasons:

A. He did not want to place an unnecessary hardship or burden upon the churches (2 Corinthians 11:7-9; 12:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). How many pastors today consider the financial burden put upon God's people when seeking a pastoral position? How many of them diligently seek the will of God in these important matters (most often, it is simply assumed that one must be salaried)?

B. He did not want to cause a hindrance to the Gospel's acceptance, since some people might assume that he was only in it for the money (1 Corinthians 9:12; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 7:2). How many pastors today, who live lavish lifestyles, ever stop to consider that this might possibly hinder the furtherance of the Gospel, or that it might feed into the stereotype that all preachers are religious hucksters?

C. He wanted to be in a position of always being able to give unto others in need, instead of continually being on the receiving end (Acts 20:33-35; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12). How often is this demonstrated in the lives and ministries of our modern pastors?

With this in mind, it is less than likely that he would have burdened the churches he planted by requiring that they secure full-time remuneration for their pastors. Carl B. Hoch, Jr., professor of New Testament at Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, states:

In New Testament days, leaders were normally not paid. That is, money was given more as a gift than as an income or a salary. Leaders like Paul could receive money, but Paul chose not to receive any from the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 9:8-12). He wanted to serve without depending on any church for financial support. Churches had a responsibility to "reward the ox" (1 Timothy 5:17) and to share with those who taught (Galatians 6:6). But money was never to be the driving force of ministry (1 Peter 5:2). Unfortunately, churches today will not call a man until they feel they can support him, and some men will not seriously consider a call if the financial package is "inadequate" (All Things New [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995] p.240).

Watchman Nee, in his book, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980), likewise states:

It is not necessary that elders resign their ordinary professions and devote themselves exclusively to their duties in connection with the church. They are simply local men, following their usual pursuits and at the same time bearing special responsibilities in the church. Should local affairs increase, they may devote themselves entirely to spiritual work, but the characteristic of an elder is not that he is a "full-time Christian worker." It is merely that, as a local brother, he bears responsibility in the local church (pp.62-63).

3. In Acts 20:33-35, Paul appears to clearly establish a pattern or model for those who serve as pastor-elders:

A. They were not to covet riches or material possessions (v.33).

B. They were to be in a position to financially meet their own needs and even the needs of others by working with their hands (v.34). Unlike the many church leaders in our day who never seem to leave their cushy chairs, Paul was not afraid of physically hard work. In the words of the Didache, "Let everyone who 'comes in the name of the Lord' be received . . . If he has no craft [occupation] provide for him according to your understanding, so that no man shall live among you in idleness because he is a Christian" (12.1, 4-5 [LCL]).

C. By working hard as did Paul, church elders were, therefore, able to both help the weak and sick as well as exemplify the words of Jesus who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (v.35).

D. When Paul says, "In everything I showed you by working hard in this manner" (v.35), it is clear that he is providing a model for them to follow. But why provide such a model if pastors are to be fully salaried and completely living off the

churches they shepherd? Such a model only makes sense if pastors, like everyone else, were to work with their hands and provide for their own needs.

John B. Polhill, professor of New Testament interpretation and Associate Dean for the School of Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has written:

In a real sense he [Paul] ended as he had begun (vv.18-21), pointing to his own deportment in ministry as an example for them to emulate. The matter in question was the leaders' relationship to material goods. Paul's detachment from material gain is well-documented in his epistles. He never used his ministry as a "mask to cover up greed" (2 Thessalonians 2:5). At Corinth he supported himself with his own hands (Acts 18:2f.; cf. 1 Corinthians 4:12; 9:12,15; 2 Corinthians 11:7; 12:13). The same was true at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8). Verse 34 [Acts 20] would indicate that he followed the same pattern of self-support at Ephesus. In his epistles Paul exhorted his Christian readers to follow his example and work with their own hands, not being dependent on others (1 Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:9). In the Miletus speech Paul gave the additional incentive that such hard work put one in the position to help the weak. In his epistles he showed a similar concern that Christians help the weak and needy, that they share in one another's burdens (cf. Romans 15:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Ephesians 4:28; Galatians 6:2). Greed is a universal human problem, and church leaders are not exempt (cf. the exhortation in v.28 for church leaders to "watch yourselves"). That avarice among church leaders was a real problem in Asia Minor seems to be attested by the Pastoral Epistles, in which Paul insisted that a major qualification for church leaders should be their detachment from the love of money (1 Timothy 3:3,8; Titus 1:7,11) . . . "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Paul applied this rule to the specific problem of avarice among church leaders. The minister is to be a servant, a giver and not a taker. Acquisitiveness has been the downfall for many a servant of God. This word of the Lord as applied by Paul is sound ministerial advice. The one who leads the flock of God should focus on the needs of others, be more concerned with giving than with acquiring. Paul had begun his address by listing the qualities of his own ministry as an example for the Ephesian leaders to follow. He concluded with a final quality he had sought to model. Perhaps he held it off to the end because he saw it as the most essential of all for a legitimate ministry (The New American Commentary: Acts (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press,1992] pp.429-430).

The late F.F. Bruce, once considered the world's foremost New Testament scholar, writes:

Returning once more to the example which he had set them, he reminds them finally that those who take care of the people of God must do so without thought of material reward. As Samuel called all Israel to witness when he was about to lay down his office as judge (1 Samuel 12:3), so Paul calls the Ephesian elders to

witness that all the time he spent with them he coveted nothing that was not his; on the contrary, he did not even avail himself of his right to be maintained by those whose spiritual welfare he cared, but earned his living – and that of his colleagues – by his own labors: "these hands," he said (inevitably with the attendant gesticulation), "ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me" (v.34). Let those to whom he was speaking likewise labor and thus support not only themselves but others as well – the sick in particular (The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Acts [Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1986] p.418).

Simon J. Kistemaker, who served for many years as professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, states:

In his [Paul] letters he discloses that he worked night and day with his own hands to support himself, so that no one would ever be able to accuse him of depending on the hearers of the Gospel for his material needs (compare 1 Samuel 12:3). He refused to be a burden to anyone in the churches he established. By performing manual labor, he provided for his financial needs. Paul received gifts from the believers in Philippi, as he himself reveals (Philippians 2:25; 4:16-18), yet he declares that he did not solicit those gifts . . . The Ephesian elders had observed Paul's ministry and physical work during his three-year stay. They were able to testify that he had never exploited anyone (2 Corinthians 7:2), but had always set an example of diligence and self-sufficiency, in the good sense of the word. He was a model to the believers and taught the rule: "If you will not work, you shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10) . . . It appears that Paul generated sufficient income to support not only himself but even his companions . . . In every respect, says Paul to the elders of Ephesus, I taught you to work hard and with your earnings to help the weak . . . He exhorts them to follow his example and to labor hard (New Testament Commentary: Acts [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990] pp.737,740).

Commenting on Acts 20:33-35, Roland Allen, author of the classic work, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1962), notes:

When I wrote this book I had not observed that in addressing the elders of Ephesus, St. Paul definitely directs them to follow his example and to support themselves (Acts 20:34-35). The right to support is always referred to wandering evangelists and prophets, not to settled local clergy (see Matthew 10:10; Luke 10:7; 1 Corinthians 9:1-14) with the doubtful exceptions of Galatians 6:6 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18, and even if those passages do refer to money gifts, they certainly do not contemplate fixed salaries which were an abomination in the eyes of the early Christians (p.50).

4. Some have appealed to Paul's words in Galatians 6:6 ("And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches") as justification for pastoral remuneration. But this is far from likely for the following reasons:

A. It is less than certain that the phrase "him who teaches" refers exclusively to pastors, but may include local or itinerant teachers. The reader should also be reminded that pastors were not the only ones who corporately taught within the local assembly (Acts 13:1; 15:35; Romans 12:7; 1 Corinthians 12:29; 14:26; 1 Peter 4:10-11). Thus, if we are going to make Galatians 6:6 denote a full-time salary for pastors, we must also include those who are teachers as well. But how many churches are willing to do this?

B. Our text urges us to "share all good things," which is a far cry from a full-time salaried position (coupled with medical insurance and a 401K retirement plan!). To "share" something with someone is not necessarily the same as continually providing them with a stipend. We remind the reader that most of the early churches were extremely poor and, therefore, it is unlikely that Paul would have commanded them to raise full-time support for one or even all of their elders.

C. The phrase "all good things" could possibly refer to periodic gifts, food, or other items by which the teacher could be benefited. To extract from this text, then, the notion of salaried pastors is a mere assumption with no exegetical warrant from either the words or surrounding context. The Lutheran commentator, R.C.H. Lenski, finds no support for this view either (although he takes Paul's words to mean "sharing in all good spiritual things"):

This is just about the opposite of the common view [i.e., salaried teachers]. In addition to the context and the meaning of the words themselves one must note that when Paul writes about the one instructing, the Galatians would at once think of their first and greatest instructor together with his assistant who had twice been in their midst. Could Paul tell the Galatians in this letter that they owed material contributions to him and to his helpers? Could he do such a thing with no further word of explanation? Paul never took money for his work. When he speaks of this subject in 1 Corinthians 9 he does so with the fullest and clearest explanation. See the same thought in 2 Corinthians 11:7-12, which should be read in its connection with 1 Corinthians 9. We ought also not to forget the Judaizers who also came as teachers, on whose greediness 2 Corinthians 11:20 enlightens us. When such greedy fellows were working in Galatia, Paul could scarcely write the Galatians to share "in all things" (material) with their teachers. Aside from the implication involving himself, such an admonition would reflect on the true teachers in Galatia and suggest that they were also men who were to be paid . . . Pay for these teachers? There is no reason for mentioning it in this epistle. The efforts to have what Paul now says support the idea that teachers are to be duly rewarded show that this conception is untenable. Paul and his assistants took no such reward. Sowing for the flesh and sowing for the spirit deal with a subject that is far greater, namely with the desire for all good spiritual things in which the Galatians should seek to share (Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961] pp. 303-304).

Following the same basic interpretation as Lenski, Steve Atkerson and Eric Svendsen have written:

On a surface level, it must be pointed out that "all good things" does not necessarily mean money. It could be gifts, food, assistance with the teacher's work, etc. On a deeper level, the context makes it clear that money, gifts, or any other material thing is really not what is in view. In this passage, Paul tells the spiritually mature to restore those who have fallen (v.1), based on the principle that we should bear each other's burdens (v.2). In the process, the spiritually mature should not think that they are superior to the fallen ones, or that they are immune to the same sin (vv.3-4). Instead, they should "watch" themselves (v.1) and continue to "carry" their own load of spiritual responsibility, while letting the fallen ones progress at their own level (v.5). In the same line of thought, Paul then tells the fallen ones (those who are being counseled – i.e., those who are being "instructed in the word") that they should share with their "instructor" any progress they have made (i.e., "all good things") (The Practice of the Early Church: A Theological Workbook [Revised] [Atlanta, GA: New Testament Restoration Foundation, 1995] p.42).

Whichever view one prefers (whether periodic gifts or in sharing all good spiritual things), it still remains difficult to see any exegetical warrant in Galatians 6:6 for a full-time pastor's salary.

5. The words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:14 ("those who preach the Gospel should receive their living from the Gospel") is another frequently cited text in support of salaried pastors. But this interpretation is highly dubious, as Atkerson and Svendsen point out:

1 Corinthians 9 does not refer to pastors, elders, or any other leader normally associated with today's church. Instead it refers to "apostles" (those who are sent out), roughly equivalent to today's missionary. We are to financially support "those who proclaim the Gospel" because of the nature of their work. The fundamental difference between the work of an elder (who is not financially supported) and the work of an apostle (who is financially supported) is that the apostle must uproot and travel from location to location. His stay is temporary; consequently, his odds for gaining employment at each location are slim. He would therefore need financial assistance to do the work for which he was sent. The elder, on the other hand, is stationed at one location. His stay is permanent . . . Even the apostles did not make their living from the church. The passage in question simply means that the need of the apostle for food, shelter, and clothing were to be met by the church (Matthew 10:9-11 was no doubt the pattern that the early church used for apostles). There was no salary involved (The Practice of the Early Church, pp.41-42).

6. Perhaps the strongest passage for paid pastors is 1 Timothy 5:17 ("Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,' and 'The

laborer is worthy of his wages’"). But, again, this is most unlikely due to the following considerations:

A. It is less than probable that the Ephesian church could have supported a full-time pastor, let alone a plurality of pastors which were already appointed by the time Paul wrote this epistle. 1 Timothy 5:17 indicates that all of the elders who rule well were to receive "double honor" (supposedly full-time pay), and not merely one man (such as the "senior pastor"). Are we to really believe that Paul wanted all of them on some kind of "payroll"? How many churches even do this in our day?

B. Paul had previously established a pattern or model for elders which meant working hard with one's hands and, thus, being in a position to help others (Acts 20:33-35). It seems hard to believe that he would have completely violated that model by now demanding that all the churches muster a full-time salary for each of their elders.

C. It is quite possible that 1 Timothy 5:17 has nothing to do with a salary or wage. Once again, Atkerson and Svendsen write:

The word "honor" in this verse (time in the Greek) means just what it is translated as – honor, not pay (unless we want to conclude that we should give some elders "double pay"!). If Paul had intended to teach that elders are to be paid, he could have used the Greek word *misthos*, which means "wages" (which he used in v.18). In v.18, Paul simply says that, just as an ox deserves to eat because of his work, and just as a worker deserves to be paid because of his work, so an elder deserves honor because of his work (v.19 gives an example of such honor – see also 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). This same word (*time*) is used in 1 Timothy 6:1; are slaves to "pay" their masters? (The Practice of the Early Church, p.42).

In his treatment of this same passage, Lenski adds these insightful comments:

It is generally assumed that the elders were paid for their services in the apostolic churches. We are convinced that this assumption is not tenable. The probability is that none of them were paid. The elders of the synagogues were not paid or salaried. Each synagogue had a number of elders, too many to have a payroll that would be large enough to support them. The apostolic congregations imitated the synagogue in this respect. Our passage speaks of "twofold honor," not of twofold financial pay or salary. Paul's two quotations support the injunction relating to according due honor to diligent elders; such honor is to be their reward just as the ox treading out grain is accorded the privilege of eating as he tramped along, just as the worker is accorded his pay. The tertium of the analogy lies in the worthiness and not in the identity of what the three are worthy of: the elders worthy of what

naturally should go with their office – honor; the ox worthy of what naturally goes with the task for which he is employed – wisps of grain; the workman worthy of what naturally goes with his work – pay for his work (Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistles to Timothy [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937] p.683).

D. If our churches truly implemented New Testament patterns of ministry, one wonders whether there would be any real need to support one, full-time pastor? If the local church had a functioning priesthood (as opposed to the passive, spectator event that is the mark of most churches) and an equally shared eldership, there simply would not be the urgency or necessity to hire someone on a full-time basis. This is because (1) leadership responsibilities would be shared; (2) one man and his gifts would not become the focal-point of the meeting; (3) corporate teaching would be shared and not left to one sole pastor; and (4) each member would actively participate and contribute to the meeting.

E. Even if, for the sake of argument, Paul refers to some form of monetary assistance, he probably intended elders to be periodically compensated for their work and not necessarily a permanent, full-time wage.

In spite of what has already been noted, we are not against any congregation which chooses, in unique circumstances, to financially support a gifted leader (perhaps so that he might devote more time to writing or teaching; or in assisting newly planted churches; or in instructing newly appointed elders, etc.). We believe, however, that such instances are intended to be the exception, not the norm.

Either way, we would highly recommend that pastors secure an additional skill or trade in the event that a congregation’s financial assistance runs out (or even if he gets terminated from his church!). Is this not the better of wisdom?

The sad truth is that most church boards never bother to consider how much money could be saved for missionary support, the poor, and literature used to advance the furtherance of the Gospel, if they did not have to remunerate a full-time pastor. We conclude our study with the advice of Steve Atkerson:

Requiring elders to be self-supporting would free large sums of money currently designated for professional pastors to be used instead in support of missionaries or to help the poor. It would also place a pastor’s motives above reproach in an era of religious shysters who purposely fleece the flock in order to finance their exorbitant lifestyles (Ezekiel 34:1-6). In addition, creating a class of salaried ministers tends to elevate them above the average believer and fosters an artificial laity/clergy distinction. Finally, salesmen tend to be extra nice toward those to whom they hope to sell something. Hiring a career clergyman puts him in a similar salesman-customer relationship, and this, no doubt to some degree, affects his dealings with significant contributors (money talks) [ed. Steve Atkerson] (Toward A House Church Theology [Atlanta, GA: New Testament Restoration Foundation, 1996] p.87).



"I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'"

(Acts 20:33-35)

"For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the Gospel of God

(1 Thessalonians 2:9)