

THE MINISTRY OF GIVING

In 2 Corinthians 8-9 we have the Churches MAINTENANCE and MOVEMENT, SUCCOUR and SUPPORT. These are paragraphs of powerful appeal in a very sensitive letter. We gather from the apostle's letter to the Roman Christians (Romans 15:25-27) and now to the church at Corinth, that he told the believers in Macedonia (Northern Greece) and Achaia (Southern Greece) about the dire straits of the saints in Jerusalem and Judea, through persecution and famine and of their reaction, particularly that from the three Macedonian churches; Berea, Thessalonica and Philippi. The apostle in writing to the Galatian churches refers to his visit to Jerusalem to acquaint the 'pillars' of the church, Peter, James and John of the success of the Gospel among Gentiles:

"...and when they perceived the grace that was given unto me....they gave me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship, that we should go unto the Gentiles. Only they would that we should REMEMBER THE POOR, which very thing I was also zealous to do" (Galatians 2:8-10).

However when he arrives at the Macedonian churches he discovers that they are extremely poor and it is very interesting to note how he deals with the situation in the context of the injunction given to him to 'remember the poor'.

The chapters before us give a detailed account of the events, reactions and results of that visit. They can be conveniently discussed under four headings as follows:

THE PLEA TO BE INVOLVED

We see in the opening paragraphs the twin streams of 'poverty' and 'liberality' flowing freely. When the Apostle saw their "affliction" and "deep poverty" (8:2) he no doubt would have in the forefront of his mind their need of material help. In the circumstances he might have argued that it wouldn't be reasonable to inflict on them the great need of the practical assistance required for the church Jerusalem. He would wait until he went south to the prosperous church in Corinth "...that you come behind in no gift." (1 Corinthians 1:7) and get what was needed there. But it is clear that he told them the situation as it was. Why? Because he saw 'giving' as a priestly ministry and part of the church's

worship and he must not deny these believers, impoverished as they were, missing out in this ministry. In this connection perhaps a practical comment is not out of place. When we meet as companies of believers to 'remember the Lord' we should always consider that our 'offering' is an integral part of the worship that we are rendering to Him. When they heard the report, they "beseeched" the Apostle to be involved and we learn the results of that:

"abounding unto the riches of their liberality, first they gave their own self to the Lord. For according to their power (ability), I bear witness, yea and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord" (v5).

We are given no clue as to the monetary amount that was collected, which is not the point; it was the heart, beating with love to their Lord and their brethren that motivated them to give.

As I consider these verses I have in my mind the situation in May 1984 in Sibiu, Romania. Four hundred believers, in boiling temperatures, crushed into an old factory building were listening to an account of the extreme famine conditions in Ethiopia. First there were tears, then sobs and finally audible cries (translated into) 'What can we do to help?' We had come from the 'West' with financial help for the suffering and impoverished Romanians, now we were privileged to see the Macedonian plea in action. Before we left an offering was taken for Ethiopia! Again I have no knowledge of the amount taken up, in their circumstances it may not have been a very large but the truth of this Macedonian example was being followed almost to the letter.

We cannot leave these paragraphs without reference to the greatest act of self sacrifice ever made, all human sacrifice fades and disappears at the profound words:

"FOR YE KNOW THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, THAT THOUGH HE WAS RICH, YET FOR YOUR SAKES HE BECAME POOR THAT YE THROUGH HIS POVERTY MIGHT BECOME RICH" (v9).

There can be no doubt that it was THIS sacrifice and supreme example that inspired them, the Romanians, and saints down the centuries, to give to those in need. This should be the basis of our giving to the Lord for His people and

maintenance of His work.

THE PRINCIPLES OF INVOLVEMENT

There are three elements in this:

i. *“For if the READINESS is there...”* (v13). This is not a tax or an obligatory tithe, yet it would appear that there is a carry over from Exodus 35:21-22 - *“And they came...everyone whom his spirit made willing and brought the Lord’s offering.”* If there is a willing mind the rest is easy. If there is no willingness it really is not worth giving at all. This has echoes of the ‘widows mite’, for her it was a willing act of dedication to God. The commendation of the Lord gives significance to this ministry of giving. This the apostle also underlines - *“Let each man do according as he hath purposed in his heart; not grudgingly, or of necessity (not obligated) for God loveth a cheerful giver.”* (9:7).

ii. *“according as a man HATH, not according as he hath not.”* It is quality God is interested in, not quantity. God does not ask any of His children to give what they do not have. Such an exercise before God would undoubtedly lead to a reassessment of one’s lifestyle. Sometimes we sing too casually:

Not that I have mine own I call, I hold it for the Giver,
My heart ,my strength , my life, my all, are His and His for
ever.

I recall both in my own Assembly, saying on one occasion “we may not speak lies, but sometimes we sing them!” I have never forgotten that.

iii. *“that others may be eased and you not distressed, but by EQUALITY...”* is the third element. God is looking for fairness and an even burden of stewardship laid upon his people. The believers in Jerusalem by this principle would accept the gift and have their distress eased. But as we shall see later it was not all a one-way exercise. What the saints in Jerusalem lacked materially was made up by them to their Gentile brothers and sisters in a spiritual way. The Lord truly is no man’s debtor.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE OF INVOLVEMENT

“But thanks be to God, which put the same earnest care for you into the same into the hear of Titus...but being himself very earnest, he went forth unto you of his own accord,” (v16). The zeal of Titus was the spontaneous action of a heart touched with the love of Christ. Note the steps that led him to take this journey south to Corinth:

He heard of the need - *“... the earnest care for you ...”* (v16),

He paid attention to what he heard - *“accepted our exhortation...”* (17),

He received the Apostle’s commendation - *“...he is my partner, my fellow worker”* (v23),

He put his exercise into practice - *“...he went forth of his own accord”* (v17).

I believe the force of this last comment is that he ‘paid his own way’, where as in relation to the two brethren that accompanied him they were sent by the churches and possibly had their expenses paid! Titus was prepared to spend and be spent not only out of respect for the apostle but also for his Master. As far as he was concerned an understanding of the plight of his fellow Christians in Jerusalem and ensuring that they got the help they needed was paramount and all the more remarkable because of their Jewish background!

THE PURPOSE OF THE INVOLVEMENT

In the latter part of chapter 9, the apostle shows that there is a three dimensional aspect to this ministry. First of all there is (as mentioned above) the material supply going east. Then we see secondly that there is a reciprocal spiritual supply coming west - *“seeing that through the proving of you by this ministration, they (the Jerusalem saints) glorify God for the obedience of your confession unto the Gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution... While they themselves also, with supplication on your behalf, long after you by reason of the exceeding grace of God in you.”* 13-14). The word “supplication” carries the meaning of beseeching, or longing for. The prayers of the church at Jerusalem were focused and intense and as I have said all the more

remarkable that the objects were Gentiles. It assures us of the work of the Holy Spirit underscoring the reality of One Body. Perhaps I can refer in this connection to another experience I had at a meeting in an isolated Romanian Assembly near the Ukrainian border in 1987. The brother who led the meeting asked me at the close if I was an American! I said "No. I come from Northern Ireland." He said to me "That's where they do the bombing!" I was stunned and before I could say anything he continued " I didn't know there were any Christians in Northern Ireland!" So totally taken aback I told him "There were thousands of believers, just the same as you here in this village." With an earnestness, which was tangible, he said, "You have brought to us today many helps for which we are very grateful and now that we know that there are Christians in Ireland we will pray for them every day." Immediately I thought as I put my arm around him, "This is 1 Corinthians 8-9 in action."

But marvellous though this is, it pales into insignificance when we consider the third dimension we could call it the Vertical one! God Himself is involved and so is His beloved Son - *"For the ministration of this service not only filleth up the measure of the wants of the saints, but aboundeth also through many thanksgivings to God. Seeing that the proving of you by this ministration they glorify God..."*

Just as God is the first cause in salvation in which we see the glory of His grace we now go a step further and see that glory manifested in the togetherness of ethnical opposites who are now one in Him resulting in added glory. Then too we must pause, as we close this study, to consider the last verse of this chapter - *"Thanks be to God for his unspeakable (inexpressible) gift"* (v15). I have no doubt that this is a direct reference to the Father's love gift - His beloved Son, and the infinite cost paid for the redemption of those He has chosen from before the foundation of the world.

*Blessed be God our God who gave for us
His well beloved Son,*

*The gift of gifts all other gifts one, He
spared not His Son.*

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