

To Hire or Not to Hire

That is the question...

So what is a hireling exactly?

This is a question the mainstream Church has almost universally ignored since the 3rd century, as if the problem does not exist and never has. Apparently, consideration of this concept puts far too much at stake, humanly speaking, for those in leadership. So we don't talk of it. It's almost taboo in the churches. And yet many of us have seen the flock scattered by "ravening wolves," or by unprincipled leaders who abandon the flock when their own interests collide with those of the sheep. It happens far too often, and takes many forms. But still, we never assign this label, even to those who abandon their charges for greener pastures. It's bad form. After all, what God-fearing pastor, especially one who achieved his position via long labor in institutions of higher learning and mountains of debt, could possibly be guilty of "not being concerned about the sheep"?¹ Isn't that why he went into the ministry in the first place?

And for the most part that *is* usually a major motivation, along with a desire to sincerely follow and please God, clearly. The problem lies in the route to achieving that objective, along which various seductions clamor for a piece of the action. Satan begins to tempt with visions of personal achievement, credibility, personal significance and status, and his final coup brings with it the security of stable and predictable income in a fulfilling career doing "God's work," along with various other benefits, including retirement. Serving God has its rewards, after all.

What we fail to consider, however, is that along with status and the security of a regular paycheck for Christian work come limitations on our freedom to follow God and to speak the truth without compromise. How so?

The reality is that there are basically two options for work in this life: self-employment, or employment by others. When we are *self*-employed, our decisions reflect what is best for our business, reputation and bottom line. On the other hand, if we are an employ-*ee*, that means we have an employ-*er* who decides what kind of job description we will have and exactly how we will carry out that job if we wish to maintain our employment. That means our primary job is to please our employer.

Of course in many, if not most churches, the senior pastor is part employer and part employee. A board often hires him and determines his salary, which is paid by the congregation or

¹ John 10:13

denomination from weekly tithes, but he may hire other staff members himself and decide what their job duties and salaries will be and evaluate their performance. If he *started* the church, he may consider it his business to make all the major decisions for the institution. And his decisions will usually hinge, at least in part, on what his congregation will support financially, since without their support, his church cannot survive.

The fallout from this is that those who pay the salaries, whether directly or indirectly, have a major (often unspoken) influence on the direction of the church and even at times on its doctrine. Keeping the sheep happy with lots of pleasant food is key then. Could this explain why so few pastors preach regularly on such threatening or unpopular topics as specific or public repentance, end times, hell, demons, obedience or perseverance? Does it explain why so few churches discipline wayward members and why so many tolerate blatant sin in their midst? Why so few speak out from the pulpit about the increasing moral degeneracy in our society or about politically incorrect topics? Possibly. Pastors often find themselves with an inherent conflict of interest between the leading of the Holy Spirit and their salary or security. And too often salary and security win the battle.

The fact is, controversial subjects are seldom discussed from the pulpit. Virtually anything that the Holy Spirit puts on a pastor's heart that threatens to alienate his employers (boards, parishioners, tithing members) can find itself shoved under the rug where it won't ever see the light of day. The risk is too much for our manmade security to bear.

Perhaps some good questions for salaried church workers to ask themselves are: "Should my livelihood be entangled with and/or entirely dependent upon my ministry?" "Was this God's plan for His Church anyway, for teachers and pastors to be fulltime professionals paid a regular salary as in other professions?" "Was it God's intent that churches would comprise large, real estate complexes (i.e., businesses) with assets to manage and protect?" And how about this one: "Would I do this job if I weren't receiving a regular paycheck for it?" "If I had to depend on freewill gifts and offerings from the congregation, or from those to whom I minister, would I continue in this line of work?" If the answer is no, or "I couldn't afford to," then ask yourself, "Am I doing this job primarily because I care about the sheep? Or am I doing it because it's all I know how to do now and I need to pay the bills?"

When a man has no other visible means of support, no other skills than the ministry he has constructed and been trained for, he is at the mercy of demonic forces who can then orchestrate various circumstances to force him to choose between his livelihood and his flock. It happens in mega-churches, denominations, community churches, country churches and even house churches, as we ourselves can attest. Men who want to be supported by their congregations or by

the Church at-large are at great risk of compromise on many levels.² Most of them are not trained for anything but Christian ministry in the system as it now exists and have arranged a fairly comfortable existence by that means. They're not about to start at the bottom of some other rung, especially when the realization of their own compromise hits them in their 40s or 50s as it so often does (if it hits at all), when they feel too old to master new skills or to command a decent salary in another field.

Paul was very aware of this potential pitfall and he never allowed himself to be ensnared by it. His ministry was never his livelihood. He had wisely developed a skill that he could take on the road if necessary, one that was in some demand. That skill kept him from dependency on the churches (though he accepted gifts and offerings to help on his journeys). Yet many, if not most, of our Christian leaders have acquiesced to the seduction of a stable and predictable income, and some even go a step further, setting up their own mini-kingdoms where they control the purse strings—as if it's *their* church, or their business. Some will stop at nothing to maintain their fiefdom and with it their comfortable living. We submit that this is the essence, or essential trait, of a hireling, putting self-interest ahead of the care, feeding and protection of the flock.

Avoiding this fate is why Paul instructed his disciples to follow his example: “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; *not because we do not have a right*, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example.” (2 Thess. 3:7-9)

He makes the same point in Acts 20:33-35: “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.’” How often have you heard those verses preached in relation to those in ministry? Probably never. Neither have I. (The emphasis always seems to be on “receiving” your tithes and offerings.)

By “*working hard in this manner*” Paul did not mean Christian service. He meant wage-earning work (or self-employment), from which he was able to help others. The temptation to give oneself elite status in order to escape this “curse” of work was anathema as far as Paul was concerned. The entire paradigm of Christianity could be all too easily skewed by this trap, seduced by the lie that ministry is for the select few who are called into “fulltime service,” or

² Including inflating their ministry successes in order to elicit greater support.

that those who are so called should not have to labor for any of their own needs. The fact is, Paul worked with his own hands to provide for his own needs and those of others and he instructed his followers to do the same. He did so for at least two reasons: to protect the gospel from slander and to remove from the devil one very convenient and seductive means for exploiting the Church.

Once the Church opted for the Pharisaic approach however, demanding many years of formal education, at great expense, for its leaders (thus making the development of other skills a practical possibility), it wasn't long before the very thing Paul feared began to happen. Men began to exploit "their" congregations for personal gain. Their own and their family's "need" for financial security and the all-too-human desire for the "normalcy" of a secular lifestyle began to morph Christianity into a bustling business and its entrepreneurs into a profession, though one with a whopping entitlement mentality. The right to support for those who preach the gospel, the right that Paul eschewed for the sake of the gospel, became standard practice. But instead of merely depending on God's provision through the generosity of those who heard and received the message, men began to claim a right to a regular salary, or others claimed it for them and provided the necessary paradigm to secure it. Proponents of such forsook the ragged edge of faith for the predictability and safety of steady supply. Once we are seduced in this way, we will sooner risk the truth than our fortune, our retirement, our home, our assets, or our income.

This concept of a special group, a ministerial or clergy class, which merits fulltime *salaried* support by the congregation (and is, in fact, often formally hired by them), is without support in the New Testament. It's an Old Testament concept and one that was abolished along with the Temple priesthood. Jesus was very clear about this. Now we are all priests, *and* all brothers.³ Yes, those who preach the gospel and teach, as their contribution to the life of the Body, are worthy of double honor, of gifts and offerings, for we are not to "muzzle ox while he's threshing," but this does not equate to a guaranteed salary and professional or elite status, though many use it to justify their own involvement in the system.

Yes, it's true that the apostles appointed deacons, so that they could attend to the ministry of the Word without being distracted by administrative issues in the churches. But there is no hint that they were employees of any organization, nor that they demanded or received a set salary, with benefits and retirement, for their work. This is where using them as justification falls apart. Not only were they not "hired" by anyone but God, but they apparently subsisted entirely on voluntary gifts and offerings so they could engage themselves fully in the commission, which is perfectly acceptable in the Church. And in addition they suffered greatly because of their boldness and commitment to truth: imprisonment, floggings, loss of homes and livelihoods and

³ Matthew 23:1-12

eventual martyrdom. That's a far cry from the lot of the typical pastor/teacher today, especially in the West.

So of course, there is a third option, which they followed, and that is to make God our employer and do His bidding no matter the cost, *or* the pay. To disentangle ourselves from the planned, pre-scripted, predictable route of material security and success in favor of the road less traveled—the Spirit-led path that Jesus and His disciples walked. That path is filled with excitement and is planned by God moment by moment as we yield to His leading and embrace all the uncomfortable aspects of such a narrow and winding road.

Jesus, and secondarily Paul, should be our example. Jesus was basically an itinerant preacher. He never drew a salary and was never hired by any human institution, religious or otherwise. He was voluntarily supported by those who responded to His message, but was basically poor (nowhere to lay His head) contrary to prosperity teaching, and He did not consider material success, in and of itself, a sign of God's favor.⁴ He did not encourage people to gain riches for themselves either, nor security. Quite the opposite. And there is no evidence that He ever *asked* for support, nor that He kept books (which explains why Judas could pilfer money from the stash and not get caught).⁵ This very fact left Him free to do God's work and convey God's message with singleness of mind and heart. He was not beholden to any group, only His own Father.

When Jesus sent the 12 and the 70 out to evangelize the cities of Judah and Israel, He did not send them with money or even extra clothing, let alone with their entire financial future planned for or provided in advance, including their retirement (something the Scriptures know nothing of). Nor did He require that they be formally educated. He simply required that they trust God completely, both for their daily sustenance and for the supernatural power they would need to carry out their mission. This was the case with all who came under His call.⁶ The reason? He wanted them to experience for themselves God's often miraculous provision, His encouragement, His faithfulness, His power, so that they would have stories, living illustrations

⁴ If it was, neither He nor Paul nor any of the apostles had God's favor. Prosperity churches teach a lot of good things, but make one major mistake when they preach that the Kingdom has already arrived and, as the King's kids, we Christians should be living like royalty, demonstrating the benefits of following Jesus. In reality, Jesus told us to take up our cross daily and follow Him, to die to self-interest, knowing that we will be persecuted if we follow Him. We not yet wed to the King and this life is a betrothal in which our love is being tested and refined. Will we be suitable companions for eternity? Will we persevere until the end? Or will we pursue comfort, wealth and power in this life over surrender and death?

⁵ Of course there were no 501C3s for Him to funnel monies through, thus no need for bookkeeping or tax receipts or records. Should we forego this benefit in the Church (assuming it is a benefit)? Some say yes, that our message would be purer and not subject to control or influence by the state. Such control is increasing and tax-deductible giving is what gives the state any credible claim on our message. The compromises of state involvement in the churches was what started a lot of our problems and we'd all be better off if we kept the government out of Church affairs. Paul was very clear about this. Even though we can argue that tax-deductions actually increase our discretionary income and potentially our giving, the price may eventually be too high for the Church to pay, both in potential state control and in the tendency it has to muddy the already murky waters of our own hearts.

⁶ Perhaps this is why He told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and come follow Him. He wanted him to experience God's supernatural provision rather than depend on his own stored wealth for his ministry.

that would both convince them and sustain them in future missionary endeavors and encourage others as well. After seeing for themselves how faithful God is to those He calls, they would never be hindered by serious doubts about God's involvement in all that He had called them to do.

Being an evangelist should be a walk of faith like that in every sense of the word. We are to "go" when ordered, and let Him worry about where our next meal is coming from. He did not even advise the disciples to have arrangements made ahead of time for their journeys, thus giving them more fodder for faith.⁷

But no, we'd sooner opt for all the complicated and burdensome preparations and plans that go into making sure we don't have to suffer any kind of privation. What a pity. How much simpler to just follow Jesus or Paul's example, trusting God completely, being led by the Spirit as to when, where, how long and how much to minister. Those who are called to evangelize foreign lands for a time will be supported supernaturally by the God who sends them, or by those who hear the message. Or they can work on the foreign field as tentmakers, like Paul did. My own son and his wife sold all they owned and went on the mission field after a series of supernatural signs convinced them that God was sending them abroad. After inviting God to be their employer, they left with little more than the clothes on their backs and God has never once failed to support them adequately, most often with enough left over for helping others. They've had three children abroad and God has kept up His end of the bargain perfectly for seven years now. And all this in a land where they are not permitted to work *and* without "raising support." It's a day-by-day proposition. This is how Christian service should look. The wind blows where it will. The witness is powerfully inspiring to those who haven't the faith for such endeavors.

Pharisaism, on the other hand, likes to lock us in to particular ministries with vows and commitments and with formal employment contracts that Jesus never intended us to make. How do we know what tomorrow will require of us? The idea that one person has to do it all or do it for life is not biblical and it smacks of grandiosity. We are a Body and each part has a function. There are seasons of ministry and varieties of gifts. God spreads the work around, calling the Church to minister to itself and to the world in love. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light, but we like to imagine ourselves as indispensable and unique, oh so special, and often take to ourselves much bigger burdens than God intended.⁸

⁷ This, of course, becomes much more complicated when we enter into marriage and bring children into the mix. Can we expect them to walk by faith also, and suffer the unpredictability, not to mention the persecution, that such discipleship brings? Many children have suffered lifelong emotional devastation at the hands of ministering parents who put their "calling" ahead of their family, or shipped their children off to others to raise.

⁸ Others of us try to shift our load onto others, and some of us pick up other people's bags instead of our own.

The next section takes an in-depth look at the anatomy of Pharisaism. First we chart what we see as the major attributes or distinctives of Pharisaic religion and then describe those attributes in more detail in the pages following. That is followed by a short discussion of the New Testament Church or “the new wine” Jesus talked about. Then we chart the main features of this living Body that Jesus birthed, followed by a discussion of its main attributes and expressions.

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