

Self-Support

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It is interesting to survey the life of Paul in reference to his custom of supporting himself throughout his ministry. One of the principles that he teaches through this policy is the principle that every member of the body of Christ has the responsibility to support himself while he preaches and teaches the gospel to others. In fact, Paul referred to this policy as a "tradition" that he had left with the Thessalonian church (2 Th 3:6-12). It was a tradition that they were to follow.

It is not certain why Paul followed this principle in his life. It may have been a result of his personal insight into the corruption of the Pharisaical system of support that was a part of Judaism. Paul was a former Pharisee, and thus, he knew the greed of the Pharisees as religious leaders of Israel. Luke said of the Pharisees that they were lovers of money (Lk 16:14). In order not to be accused of preaching for money, therefore, Paul sought to support himself in his ministry to preaching to gospel.

The reason why he did such was probably more for giving us an example of individual ministry, as opposed to "clergy" oriented system of "fulltime" religious leaders in his day, which system is very prevalent in our societies today throughout the world. Once churches hire a preacher, they at the same time hire their work done for them. Regardless of what we might say, there is a mental switch the goes off in our minds as soon as we put someone on salary to work locally for the church. We have hired someone to do something for us, and thus, we relieve ourselves of a certain part of our responsibility. It is like one person once told me, "Before he had a fulltime preacher, all of us felt responsible for the growth of the church."

We must keep our selves in perspective here in reference to the support of evangelists. It has always been a principle that workers be supported fulltime in their service of the needs of the church. Paul wrote, "*Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel*" (1 Co 9:14). There is no question concerning the church's responsibility to support evangelists. We must not muzzle the ox who treads out the grain (1 Co 9:9). The laborer is worthy of his hire (1 Tm 5:18). These are unquestionable mandates to the church to send forth evangelists to preach to those from whom they do not take support (3 Jn 7,8). Therefore, we ought to support such in order that we be fellow workers for the truth.

In reference to sending forth evangelists, we have often failed to emphasize the efforts of evangelists who have gone forth supporting themselves. The self-supported evangelist is the evangelist who has chosen to support himself in his commitment to fulfill the great commission. Paul was one of those men. During most of his life after his conversion, he was of that group of evangelists who sought to support themselves. Though he was at times supported by the church, a close examination of his ministry suggests that he mostly supported himself rather than be supported by the church. If you would allow us the privilege some assumptions in conjunction with some plain statements of Scripture, believe it would be good to reconsider Paul's financial self-sufficiency by which he carried out his Christ-given commission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, Jews and kings (At 9:15,16).

Paul was a tentmaker by trade (At 18:3). This was a

mobile type of work that could be carried out at any place in the ancient world of Paul's day. A needle, thread and cloth was all that was needed in order to set up shop and start producing tents. It was a self-employment job where Paul was not punching the time-clock of an employer. Therefore, the job allow one to be independent and mobile. It was the ideal trade for one who would be given a mission to preach the gospel to the world.

Paul was converted between A.D. 40 and 45. After his conversion, he spent three years in Damascus and Arabia (Gl 1:17,18). We could assume that he was supported by the brethren in Damascus while he was in the city. However, we do not know how he lived or where he lived when he went to Arabia. We do not know how much of the three years he mentioned in Galatians 1:17,18 was actually spent in Arabia. Whatever the case, according to the tenor of his life after his conversion, we could assume that he supported himself at least some of this time.

From Damascus he went to Jerusalem and stayed for two weeks (Gl 1:18). From there he traveled to Syria and Cilicia (Gl 1:21). It is believed that he stayed in the region of Syria and Cilicia from seven to ten years. During this time we would assume two things. First, we would assume that he continued to preach the gospel. Secondly, we would assume that he made tents, and thus, supported himself throughout this period. We have no revelation in the New Testament concerning what Paul actually did during his many years in Syria and Cilicia. However, we could assume that he was not quiet concerning the gospel which was confirmed to him on the Damascus road. Since he was unknown by face to the churches in Judea prior to his visit in Acts 15 (Gl 1:22), we could also assume that these churches did not support him, and thus, he supported himself.

After the death of Stephen, many were scattered abroad to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (At 11:19). When converts from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch, they preached to the Greek speaking Jews, many of whom were converted. Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem in order to exhort those of this new church establishment (At 11:22,23). After exhorting the brethren, Barnabas went to Tarsus in search of Paul in order to have help concerning the newly establish church in Antioch (At 11:25). After Barnabas returned with Paul from Tarsus, both of them taught the church in Antioch for an entire year (At 11:26). We would assume that during this year Paul could have either supported himself through tentmaking, or he and Barnabas could have been relieved of such by the Antioch church. From what Paul wrote of himself and Barnabas in 1 Corinthians 9:6, it appears that they both worked on the first journey and in antioch in order to support themselves. Paul wrote, "*Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?*" Paul wrote this in the context of accusations of preaching for money. However, both he and Barnabas had always sought to support themselves when they were located at a particular location for any period of time. We could correctly assume, therefore, that from the time of his conversion until his arrival in Antioch of Syria, a period of possibly ten to twelve years, Paul support himself most of the time.

After some time in Antioch, the brethren in Syria took up a special famine relief contribution and sent it by the hands of Paul and Barnabas to the brethren in Judea (At 11:30). We would assume that the church would have supported these two evangelists on this benevolent mission to Judea. We do not know how much time Paul and Barnabas spent in Judea, but they later returned to Antioch, bringing with them John Mark (At 12:25). We could assume, therefore, that since neither Paul or Barnabas had time to set up their tentmaking work on this trip, they were fully supported by the church of

either Antioch or Jerusalem.

What is commonly referred to as the first missionary journey of Paul began in Acts 13:3,4. When the Antioch church sent Paul, Barnabas and John off on this journey, we would assume that they gave them some money to sustain them for several weeks. This first missionary journey lasted about two years. We would not assume that the Antioch church gave Paul and Barnabas two years of gold coins to carry around on their person on this journey. Such would have been both impractical and unsafe. Neither were they given a Visa card or a check book. We would conclude that they had to support themselves after the Antioch support ran out.

A few years later when Paul wrote of his mission travels with Barnabas, he spoke of he and Barnabas both foregoing church support in order to support themselves (1 Co 9:6). We would conclude that both evangelists made tents on the first missionary journey, and thus, they were self-supporting on most of the journey. Paul boasted of his preaching without charge (1 Co 9:18). He did not seek the support of those to whom he preached in order that he might be free from the strings that are often attached with the support. He wrote, *“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more”* (1 Co 9:19).

At the conclusion of the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch of Syria (At 14:26). They remained in Antioch “a long time” (At 14:28). During this time we would assume that the Antioch church supported Paul. However, because it was his principle not to eat other man’s food without charge, and what he said of himself and Barnabas in 1 Corinthians 9:6, we could also assume that he set up his tentmaking business while he stayed in Antioch. When he was a resident evangelist in Ephesus he *“coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel”* (At 20:33). He worked with his own hands in order to support himself (At 20:34). While in Thessalonica he did not eat bread free of charge (2 Th 3:8). In the recorded cases where Paul spent any period of time, it seems that he supported himself without taking the support of the local brethren (See At 18:3). We could thus assume that the times he stayed in Antioch, he supported himself.

Around A.D. 50, the Antioch church sent Paul and Barnabas, with some other brethren, to Jerusalem in order to deal with a conflict over judaizing teachings (At 15:2). We would assume that the Antioch church supported these men on their journey to Jerusalem and during the time of their stay in the city. After the Jerusalem meeting, Paul returned to Antioch (At 15:35).

Around A.D. 53 he set out on his second missionary journey with Silas as his fellow worker. We would again assume that the Antioch brethren gave them money to last throughout the first part of their journey. However, when the money ran out, they were back to making tents.

From Antioch, Paul and Silas traveled to Derbe and Lystra, where they were joined by Timothy (At 16:1). From Galatia Paul, Silas and Timothy went on to Troas where they were joined by Luke (At 16:8). From Troas they went to Philippi where they stayed for only a few days (At 16:12). From Philippi, Paul, Silas and Timothy went on to Thessalonica (At 17:1). Luke stayed in Philippi.

While in Thessalonica, the small church of Lydia, her household, the jailor and his household, sent support once and again unto Paul, Silas and Timothy while they were in Thessalonica (Ph 4:15,16). However, when Paul later wrote to the Thessalonian church, he rehearsed the fact that he worked to support himself while preaching in Thessalonica. *“For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you,*

we preached to you the gospel of God" (1 Th 2:9). They did such in order to establish a "tradition" that in working we should help the poor (At 20:34). When Paul wrote the second letter to the Thessalonians, he stated, *"For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you"* (2 Th 3:7,8).

From Thessalonica Paul went on to Berea (At 17:10). From Berea he went to Athens (At 17:15). Since the Philippians were sending once and again to his needs (Ph 4:15,16), we could assume that at least some of his support came as a contribution from brethren while in Athens. However, when he went over to Corinth, he established himself with Aquila and Priscilla who were also tentmakers (At 18:1-3). Throughout Paul's eighteen months in Corinth he did not receive any support from the Corinthians (1 Co 9:6). He preached to them "free of charge" (2 Co 11:7). He did not want to be a financial burden to them (2 Co 12:14). Titus also followed the same principle when he visited them several years later (2 Co 12:18).

Though Paul did make tents in Corinth in order to support himself, what was lacking in support was made up by contributions that came from the Macedonian churches. He wrote to the Corinthians, *"And when I was present with you, and in need, I was a burden to no one, for what was lacking to me the brethren who came from Macedonia supplied. And in everything kept myself from being burdensome to you, and so I will keep myself"* (2 Co 11:9; see Ph 4:15,16). The nature of his statement in 2 Corinthians 11:9 indicates that it was his custom to make tents in order to support himself, which support was supplemented by church support. It was not the other way around. He was not supported by the church, and then supplement his support by making tents.

The Macedonian churches, therefore, supplemented his tentmaking. Because of this, Paul later rebuked the Corinthians by saying that he robbed other churches in order to minister to them (2 Co 11:8). Though he said he wronged them by not taking their support (2 Co 12:13), he said that in the future he would continue not to take support from them because of their arrogant false teachers among them who were accusing him of preaching for hire (2 Co 11:10-12). Because he did not take their support, he could boast that he preached to them without taking support (1 Co 9:15). He used his self-support as a challenge to his accusers that they should do the same if their motives were genuine.

From Corinth Paul traveled on to Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla (At 18:19). He left Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus and went on to Jerusalem. From there he returned to Ephesus (At 19:1). Paul stayed two years in Ephesus. He again supported himself. He taught in the school of Tyrannus. We are not told if he taught in this school for a salary. However, when he talked of his tenure in Ephesus with the Ephesian elders a few years later, he said, *"Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me"* (At 20:34). He did not take support from the church while he was two years in Ephesus. He supported himself. His reason for doing this was as he stated to the Ephesian elders. *"I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'"* (At 20:35).

Paul concluded his third missionary journey around A.D. 58. He was arrested in Jerusalem and imprisoned in Caesarea from A.D. 58 to 60. He was another two years imprisoned in Rome in A.D. 61,62. During these four years he was on government "support."

It would be difficult to determine exactly how much

time during his missionary journeys he was supporting himself. However, one thing is quite clear. It was the principle of his life to support himself. It almost seems as if Paul would accept support from the church only as a last resort for survival. He had learned *“not to speak in regard to need”* (Ph 4:11). He wrote to the Philippians, *“I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need”* (Ph 4:12). His answer to living the committed life without great concern for his financial well-being was, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* (Ph 4:13). These are impressive words when one considers the fact that they were written by one who was in a Roman prison on trial for his life.

Paul’s determination to accomplish his God-given destiny did not depend on the support of the church. He accomplished his work regardless of support, not because the church supported him. The tremendous lesson that he teaches us through this principle of his life is the fact that every self-supporting wage-earning Christian has a ministry as Paul. Paul’s priority was on preaching the gospel. Such should be the priority of every Christian. How one supports himself in his personal ministry to preach the gospel is only the means by which he can sustain himself in his work. Paul sought to leave us an example. He left a tradition, that by laboring night and day, we should ministry the gospel to others (2 Th 3:6-9).