

Doctrinal Brief: Part-Time Pastors

John F. Brug

There are a number of situations in which congregations of our fellowship call "part-time pastors".¹ One is the so-called "social security call," in which a small congregation or preaching station, which does not have enough members to provide a full-time pastor with sufficient financial support to meet the basic needs of life, calls a pastor who has retired or who is about to retire from full-time service to provide them with basic services. It is understood that he will not be expected to provide the same level of service that would be expected of a pastor who could devote his full time and energy to his call. They will not be able provide him with sufficient pay to fully care for his basic needs of life, so he will support himself in part out of his retirement income. This might happen in a situation where the congregation hopes that these services might be a springboard to growth that will enable the congregation to call a full-time pastor or it may be a concession to the probability that the congregation has very limited prospects for growth, but they would like to preserve services for as long as possible.

Another example is so-called "tent ministry" calls, in which a younger pastor who is still willing and capable of serving in a fulltime capacity is asked to obtain part of his support from secular employment. There is a group that wants to begin or maintain services in an area, but there is not yet a sufficient nucleus to support a pastor with a full-time salary. Sometimes this is done with the hope that the pastor will soon work himself into a full-time job. In other cases, this might seem to be a more distant hope.

On the basis of Scripture, we have always warned against limited or probationary calls in situations in which there is an open-ended need. How do part-time social-security calls or tent-minister calls fit into the scriptural picture of the call to the pastoral ministry?

First of all, Scripture makes it very clear the ordinary, God-ordained arrangement is that the called preachers of the gospel should devote themselves fully to the preaching of the gospel and that they should receive their financial support from the recipients of their ministry. The public ministry is a means of livelihood for full-time servants of the Word. That ministers are supported by their hearers is not a human business arrangement of so much pay for so much service. It is the command and ordinance of God.

The Lord has commanded (διέταξεν) that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel (1 Co 9:14).

Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor (Ga 6:6).

Paul bases this principle on common sense, on the Old Testament law, and on the command of Christ.

⁷Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? ⁸Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? ⁹For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. ¹¹If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹²If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. ¹³Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel (1 Co 9:7-14).

This right of support extends also to the pastor's family.

⁴Don't we have the right to food and drink? ⁵Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with

¹ By part-time pastors we here refer to situations where a part-time pastor is the only pastor of a congregation. We are not considering cases in which a retired pastor, for example, helps the regular pastor with shut-in calls.

us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? ⁶Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? (1 Co 9:4-6).

In his letter to Timothy, his young co-worker, Paul again affirms that this principle rests both on Old Testament law and on New Testament command.

¹⁷The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages" (1 Ti 5:17-18).

Here he quotes both from the law of Moses (Dt 25:4) and from the gospel of Luke. The reference to Luke 10:7 is especially interesting for three reasons. It shows that the Gospel of Luke was recognized as the inspired Word of God from the beginning. It applies the principle even to cases in which there is not a formal organized congregation, as was the case when the Seventy[-two] went out on their mission journey. It shows that Paul understood that the Lord had applied the principle of pay also to traveling missionaries such as himself.

This makes his reluctance to use his right at Corinth all the more striking. This was a concession to the weakness of the Corinthians for which he does not commend them.

I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you (2 Co 11:8).

There were congregations poorer than the Corinthians (the Macedonians, especially the Philippians) who sacrificed so that Paul could preach the gospel in other places where the support was not yet there.

In the Old Testament too, the rule was that the called workers, the priests and Levites, should receive their living from their work. The exception to the rule, who disavowed financial support, was Amos, a lay prophet sent to an audience that had turned their backs on the true ministry to support an evil crew of usurpers.

It is clear that full support that enables full-time service is the ideal and the norm. This leads us to think about the limitations and weakness of part-time service as the sole ministry in a congregation.

The first, and perhaps the most serious, is that it does not meet the need. I know of no place in the world that has need only for a part-time preaching of the gospel. In every place there are more than enough straying, unchurched, and unbelievers to more than consume the time of a full-time pastor. It is, therefore, not a lack of need but a lack of strength that leads to only part-time ministry in a place.

Whether this deficiency is blameworthy depends on whether the weakness is weakness of numbers, resources, and circumstances or if it is weakness of spirit. The establishment of part-time pastorates may be the result of unwillingness of the church to support something more, or it may be the result of a heroic determination to preserve or begin the preaching of the gospel in an area where humanly speaking the prospects seem bleak. Only honest examination of hearts can answer that question. Where part-time pastorates are being considered, all parties involved should ask themselves some honest questions.

Have the other options that could maintain a full-time ministry been pursued and shown to be impossible? Are there other congregations close enough that we could share a pastor with them? Would this best be done as a dual parish or as one congregation? Are there other Christians who can and should be helping and supporting us in our need? These are questions not just for those who are being served by a part-time pastor but by all of us. Are we doing all we should be doing to help congregations that have suffered economic or demographic loss? The need for us to start mission efforts with tent-makers when there are men willing to serve full-time may be an indictment of a lack of zeal in supporting missions on the part of the church as a whole.

Is the financial weakness that seems to make this limited service necessary real or imagined? Are we unable to support a full-time pastor in spite of the fact that we are giving 10% of our income to support the gospel or is it because we are satisfied with 2 or 3%? If we all gave according to the same proportion that was the starting point for Old Testament believers in supporting their workers, ten families would be able to support a pastor's salary which provided the same standard of life which they themselves enjoy. (A congregation, of course, has other expenses too.)

Are we doing this as an emergency measure to get us back to the point where we want to be and where we know we should be, or are we learning to accept this limited service as satisfactory, as something that we can live with? Are we learning to be satisfied with a situation in which our desires for basic services for ourselves are being met, even while the needs of the lost all around us, which cry to heaven, are left unmet? Our conference of presidents has been reluctant to grant calls for tent-ministers, in cases in which there is no commitment and plan for working to bring full-time gospel ministry to the area in question. Appropriately so, since this was always Paul's goal wherever he worked. We may have to live with emergency measures for a time, but we should never accept them as the norm.

Are we being fair to the retired pastor or tent minister? Are we really hoping that in his love for the gospel, he will provide us with full-time service for half-time pay? It may be a noble thing for a part-time pastor to offer full-time service for part-time pay in order to meet a real need and to provide a foothold for the gospel in an area, but it is not a good thing for him to enable shallow commitment or wrong attitudes toward stewardship and the ministry. As it was for Paul at Corinth, part of his pastoral duty is to work to lead the congregation to a higher level of understanding, commitment, and support. One of the highest goals of a part-time, retired pastor should be to work himself out of a job and hand the reins to a full-time pastor.

Are we talking about part-time ministry which meets the full list of spiritual needs, or are we satisfied with part of the ministry? (It can, of course, divide them among a number of ministers.) A part-time minister may have a smaller flock, which may require fewer hours of his time, but if he is the only shepherd of the flock, he has the same duty to be an overseer and a watchman that the full-time pastor of a larger flock has. He has the same duty to encourage growth in Bible study and stewardship. He has the same duty to admonish those who are living in sin. He has the same duty to lead the congregation in exercising church discipline on the impenitent. If a congregation, for example, called a part-time pastor with the understanding that he was to provide a Sunday service and classes, but that he was not to "meddle" in the personal lives of the members, this would be an ungodly arrangement. Such terms could not, in good conscience, be accepted or honored. We cannot acquiesce to a call that dishonors the man or the office.

¹²Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work (1 Th 5:12-13).

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you (He 13:17).

Paul says, "We put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ." Paul was willing to make a lot of sacrifices for the gospel. Paul was willing to work patiently with the weak to overcome a weakness, but he was not willing to condone or accept weak support for the ministry or truncation of the ministry as the norm. I do not believe Paul ever thought of himself as a part-time apostle even when he was making tents. Within the apostolic ministry, which could not be truncated or curtailed, he had freedom in cases of necessity to devote part of his time to earning support for himself until the gospel ministry could be placed on a firmer foundation of support. This was another example of his stewardship of his office in which he offered people "not only the gospel, but his life as well" (see 1 Th 2:8). He had not merely a job, but a vocation. In every case and circumstance in which he found himself he was devoting his whole life to the gospel. In some special cases, this devotion of his life to the gospel meant that he would devote some time to earning part of his living in secular employment, but this was the exception to the rule, not the standard or the ideal.