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The "Only Saints" Doctrine of Benevolence and "Koinonia Mountain"

By
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Those who have been following the *Harvesters* lately know that the recent issues have been dealing with "anti" doctrines. Among the most distinct of these doctrines is the idea that only Christians can scripturally receive benevolent aid from the church treasury. These brethren claim to have found an "exclusive pattern" in the distribution of church funds. They affirm such propositions

treasury." Although this writer has not found a logical syllogism that sets out to prove their doctrine, their two most deceptive arguments make up the title of this article.¹

"ONLY SAINTS"

First, let us consider the "only saints" doctrine of benevolence. This doctrine is so named not because the Bible explicitly states "saints only," but supposedly because the Bible explicitly states only "saints." In the attempt to prove this point a number of Scriptures are given (i.e. Acts 2:45; 4:34-35; 6:1-6; 11:27-30; 24:17; Rom. 15:25-31; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:6-9; 1 Tim. 5:3-16). From these verses it is concluded that since all recipients of this church benevolence were saints, then only saints can receive benevolence from the church today. From the start, it should be obvious upon reading some of these passages that one has to assume that the funds were

distributed only to saints. If it is the case that even one passage casts doubt upon the funds being used to relieve only saints, then any dogmatic insistence upon the "only saints" doctrine of benevolence is sinful (i.e. binding opinion as if it were God's law). Acts 2:45 states that the first Christians "*sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.*" To dogmatically affirm the "only saints" position from this verse, one must prove that "*all*" ($\pi\alpha\sigma\iota\nu$ from $\pi\alpha\varsigma$) is limited to "all Christians," and that "*every man*" ($\tau\iota\varsigma$) is limited to "every Christian" who had a need. Suppose one of the early Christians had children whose needs were met by this distribution? If this were the situation then the "only saints" doctrine collapses. The silence of Scripture does not prove whether or not this situation existed, but "*all*" and "*every man*" surely allow such. The

From a church in Florida comes the following:

Dear Brother Jack Stearsman,

We have lost to the "Anti" movement at this time seven members and eight children.

Signed/ Your Brother in Christ

as "the Scriptures teach that in benevolence a church of Christ may relieve only saints from its

point is that showing beyond doubt that "all" and "every man" refers only to saints is impossible. The same can also be said of other verses (cf. Acts 4:35; 2 Cor. 9:13).

Coupled with these passages is the insistence that the distribution of church funds falls under "the-Bible-only-says" category of authorization. The following "reasoning" (?) is given as an example: (1) just as God did not say "use unleavened bread and grape juice only" for communion, but He "only said" use "unleavened bread and grape juice" (Mt. 26:26-27); and (2) just as God did not say "sing only" in worship, but He "only said" sing (Col. 3:16); so also (3) God did not say "saints only" are to receive benevolent aid from the church, but He "only said" saints (1 Cor. 16:1-2). A detailed examination of each point is not necessary because neither one of them, individually or collectively, prove an "exclusive pattern" for the distribution of church funds.

The honest Bible student will agree that the collection of First Corinthians 16:1-4 was for the primary purpose of relieving the needy Judean saints (cf. Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:25-31; 2 Cor. 8-9). But is this the only reason why a collection can be taken upon the first day of the week? Why do those who claim to see an "exclusive pattern" for the distribution of church funds refuse to accept an "exclusive pattern" for the collection of church funds? There is no explicit example of a collection being taken from Christians for

any other reason than helping those in need. By what authority, therefore, do the "only saints" brethren even have a church treasury? By what authority do they write checks from that treasury for anything other than benevolent aid to Judean saints? To claim that the Bible authorizes "only" by what it explicitly "says" (or exemplifies) and then do something other than "only" what the Bible explicitly says (or exemplifies) is hypocritical.

The truth of the matter is that such things as a treasury and the distribution of funds from the treasury are matters of expedient judgment. In every God-authorized action there are matters of obligation (i.e. matters which may not be changed or omitted) and matters of expediency (i.e. matters of human judgment which give advantage in executing authorized actions). For example, the Bible authorizes us to teach (Mt. 28:18-19; Eph. 4:15; 2 Tim. 2:2 et al.). Teaching involves some "obligations" (i.e. must teach the "apostles' doctrine," Acts 2:42; must teach the "truth in love," Eph. 4:15). However, teaching also involves some "expedients" (i.e. use of literature, simultaneous classes, web site, etc.). A church treasury and the use of its funds fall into the realm of expediency. Any lawful distribution of its funds that gives advantage to executing a God-authorized action is scriptural (cf. Col. 3:17). This may include giving benevolent aid to non-Christians, paying

the preacher, or maintaining a building.

"KOINONIA MOUNTAIN"

Next, let us consider "Koinonia Mountain." This deceptive argument says that all distribution of church funds for benevolence necessarily involves spiritual fellowship with the recipients of such funds. They appeal to Second Corinthians 9:13 which speaks of the Gentile saints' "liberal distribution" (from "κοινωνία") to the needy Judean saints. The conclusion is thus drawn that because the word often translated "fellowship" (κοινωνία) is used to describe this monetary gift of benevolence, all monetary gifts of benevolence collected and distributed by the church necessarily involve spiritual "fellowship" (κοινωνία) with the recipients. Since spiritual "fellowship" cannot be granted to non-Christians, the "only saints" brethren claim that benevolent aid from the church treasury cannot be given to non-Christians.

This supposedly "un-

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get-over-able" mountain contains at least two glaring errors. First, there is a misunderstanding of "fellowship" (κοινωνία). The word in its various contexts can mean "association, communion, fellowship, close relationship . . . generosity, fellow-feeling, altruism . . . sign of fellowship, proof of brotherly unity . . . gift, contribution . . . participation, sharing in something."² Yes, the Gentile Christians demonstrated their spiritual fellowship with the Judean Christians, but not because of some inherent quality in the contributed currency. Rather, they had spiritual fellowship with one another because of their mutual submission to the Gospel (cf. 1 Jn. 1:7). God was glorified through this collection because the Gentiles proved their submission to the Gospel by helping those in need (cf. Acts 20:35), and the Jews proved their submission to the Gospel by accepting the Gentiles as the family of God (cf. 2 Cor. 9:14). Given the first century tensions between Jews and Gentiles, the spiritual significance of this contribution cannot be overlooked! Second, there is an unwarranted distinction made between individual action and church action. The "only saints" brethren readily admit that it is scriptural for an individual Christian to give benevolent aid to non-Christians. They claim, however, that such passages as Galatians 6:10 and James 1:27 only authorize individuals, not local churches, to render benevolent aid to non-Christians. But how can an

action that is possible for individuals to do collectively be scriptural for the individual to do but unscriptural for the group of individuals to do? Such a distinction is illogical, unscriptural, and ridiculous.

The doctrine that "only saints" can scripturally receive benevolent aid from the church treasury is false. This, of course, is not to say that a local congregation must give benevolent aid from the church treasury to non-saints. The distribution of church funds is a matter of expediency that must be governed by principles of scriptural stewardship. However, to insist that it is sinful to give benevolent aid to non-saints is to bind a doctrine that God has not bound. Positively, the following argument demonstrates the scripturalness of a local church giving benevolent aid to non-Christians: If it is the case that an individual can scripturally give benevolent aid to those in need, whether or not the recipients are Christians (and it is cf. Gal. 6:10; Jms. 1:27); and if it is the case that all scriptural individual action which is possible for a group of individuals to do is action which is scriptural for a group of individuals to do (and it is cf. Gal. 6:6; Eph. 5:19; Rev. 2-3); then it is the case that a group of individuals can scripturally give benevolent aid to those in need, whether or not the recipients are Christians.

ENDNOTES

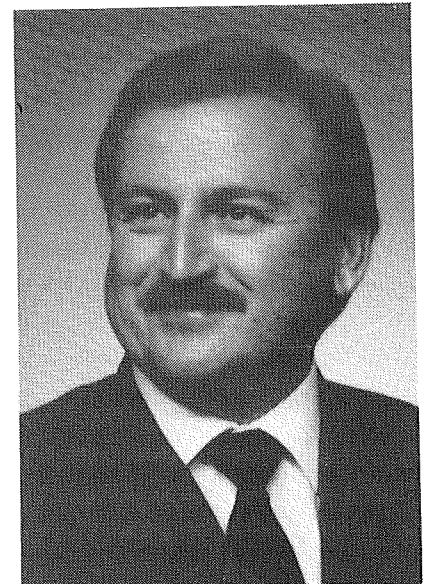
¹ Much of the "only saints" position is adapted from

notes taken during a debate held between Virgil L. Hale and Steve D. Walker in Trenton, TN, Oct. 26-27, 1995. In this debate brother Walker affirmed the proposition: "The Scriptures teach that in benevolence a church of Christ may relieve only saints from its treasury."

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. by Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 438-439.



Midterm Graduate



David A. Hartbarger

Besides the graduates in May we have graduated at midterm, David A. Hartbarger. David is a native of Middleton, Ohio. His wife is the former Sandra Allen and she is from Trenton, Ohio. They have one daughter, Lori.

Before enrolling in *Florida School of Preaching*, David worked with Southern Bell. He was serving as an elder of the Palm Bay Church of

Christ when enrolled as a student. David began preaching for the Ocoee Church of Christ in June 1996.



REFLECTIONS ON DIRECTIONS

I once was asked what my duties were when I assumed the label, "Director of the Florida School of Preaching." Without much forethought, I replied, "I take a lot of direction." While the reply was intended to be humorous, what is stated has fundamental significance.

Manifold Direction

In the position of helping to provide direction to any entity, be it family, business, social gathering, church, et al., direction needs to be carefully and prayerfully considered. We should ask: (1) What has God to say on the subject? (2) What have Godly people to say about the subject? (3) What have serious and informed critics to say about the subject? (4) What is the effect upon the ones being directed, and what do they have to say about the subject? You see, before we may suggest direction we need assistance.

Would we be out of place borrowing an expression from the Lord as a catalyst for this principle? "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one

that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matt. 7:7-8).

No New Principles

When it comes to morals and religion, there are no new principles to give direction. In the days of Jeremiah, the people were called to ask for the Old Paths and the Good Way and to Walk therein, but they stubbornly refused (Jer. 6:16). Today, we have the all sufficient Bible and warnings that to go beyond it is not to have God (Gal. 1:6-9; II Tim. 3:14-17; II John 9-11), and men go their own way as of old.

While it is true, there are no new principles, this does not mean there are not expedient means of directing people to the fundamentals of life. For example, the electronic media is a modern tool that is helpful to instill the truths of God today.

As one who must provide direction, it is comforting to know that the paths have been traveled before us, the journey completed, and the shores of home reached successfully. May we in directing our selves and/or others draw heavily from the principles of old.

Giving and Receiving

The best directors are the ones who take direction. The Bible warns parents of provoking children to wrath by harsh and unjust criticism and actions (Eph. 6:4). The church will always have Diotrophes types who would Lord it over others (III

John 9-10; I Pet. 5:3). Those who do not take direction well are likely to be as the Pharisees of old who bound heavy burdens upon others, but would not think of lifting their man made regulations for others (Matt. 23: 3-4).

This writer is happy to be surrounded by some of the best direction anyone could expect. He has the Bible with its wealth of information and examples. He has a Board of Directors with years of experience in many avenues that call for decisions. How lonely, and overpowering, the duties of direction would be if it were not for helpful directions.

Reflecting

Let us reflect upon the task directing as we begin the new year. Who directs us? In what direction are we going? Where may we find light for the journey? He who wants to be our Leader provides for us a song in the night. Those who have the responsibility of directing any endeavor will appreciate, before the journey is long, the need for that song in the night. Not once but often will the reflections be much like that expressed in the Book of Job: "But none saith, Where *is* God my maker, who giveth songs in the night; Who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wiser than the fowls of heaven? There they cry, but none giveth answer, because of the pride of evil men" (Job 35:10-12).



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