

BIBLICAL PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES

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After his career in schoolteaching and teacher-training, John Baigent has taken early retirement in order to devote himself full-time to Christian teaching and training, divided equally between his own local church and wider ministry. Here in concise form is his analysis of the biblical teaching relating to full-time Christian ministry.

Introduction

Is the idea of a resident FTW biblical? That is the basic question that this paper seeks to address. By 'biblical', some people will mean, Is there a scriptural *precedent* for having a resident full-time worker? That will involve us in looking at the New Testament to discover the range and nature of ministry in the early church. The problem with this approach is that the New Testament evidence on this topic is scrappy and incomplete and does not lead to a comprehensive picture of church life in New Testament times. More seriously, it raises the question as to whether the New Testament is intended to provide a blueprint for church life. Are we compelled to copy what was done in New Testament times (as far as it is depicted)? Where scripture is silent on a particular matter, are we at liberty to do what seems best to us? Or should we look in the Bible for basic spiritual *principles* which can and should be applied at all times?

The approach adopted in this paper will be first to look at the New Testament picture of church life and to see what *practices* were current at the time, but then to examine the teaching of the Bible to discover the *principles* which underlay those practices and which should still control our church life.

Biblical Practices

The New Testament depicts a considerable variety of ministries, some largely *itinerant* and others mainly *settled*. This distinction is not absolute, since those involved in itinerant ministry often settled for some time in one place. Perhaps the distinction should be between *local* ministries and *wider* ones.

Itinerant ministry

Itinerant Christian workers in New Testament times included apostles, evangelists, prophets and teachers. The apostles were commissioned to go into all the world as evangelists and teachers (Mt. 28:19f; Acts 1:8). This might well involve staying or being based in one place for a considerable time (cf Peter: Acts 8:14, 25; 9:43; 12:17; Paul: Acts 11:26; 15:35; 18:11; 19:10; 20:18ff), but ultimately it was a roving commission (cf Acts 9:32; Rom. 15:18ff, 23f). Similarly, evangelists like Philip, whilst they might reside in one place for some time (cf Acts 8:5ff, 40; 21:8), were at the Lord's disposal to be moved about (cf Acts 8:26ff, 40). There is also evidence that prophets, although normally based in one place (cf Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 14:29), might travel about amongst the churches (cf Acts 11:27; 15:32; 21:10). Probably we should also include here men like Timothy and Titus who seem to have been apostolic delegates, based for a time in one place but with responsibility for an area, and yet subject to recall by their apostle (cf 1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:15; 4:9, 13, 21; Tit. 1:5; 3:12).

We have little direct evidence as to how these itinerant Christian workers were financially supported or indeed whether they were in fact 'full-time'. It is quite probable that in many cases they engaged in secular employment, probably on a part-time basis, in order to support themselves (cf Paul: Acts 18:3; 20:33ff; 1 Cor. 9:6; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7ff). On the other hand, 1 Corinthians 9:1–15 implies that at least some of the apostles received their means of livelihood from those to whom they ministered, and 2 Corinthians 11:8ff and Philippians 4:15ff point to the practice of some Pauline churches in sending gifts to their founding apostle.

If we ask the question, To whom were they responsible? we have even less evidence on which to base a firm answer. Clearly each of the Lord's servants is accountable ultimately only to God (cf Rom. 14:4; 1 Cor. 4:2–5), but that need not rule out some responsibility or answerability to other Christians through whom the Lord's direction might well come (cf Acts 11:22; 13:1ff). Peter felt obliged to answer criticisms of his actions (Acts 11:1–18). At the end of their first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas reported back to the commending church at Antioch (Acts 14:26f) and then found it necessary to clear their evangelistic message and strategy with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15; Gal. 2:1–10). In 2 Corinthians Paul feels it advisable to explain and defend his actions to one of his churches. Presumably Timothy and Titus and other apostolic delegates were answerable to their supervising apostle (cf 1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 4:2, 9; Tit. 1:5; etc).

Settled ministry

Ministry in the local church in New Testament times was in the first instance based on a wide variety of 'charismatic' gifts (cf 1 Cor. 12:7–11) which were apparently exercised in an ad hoc manner (cf 1 Cor. 14:26) but which also led to certain people being recognised as fulfilling particular roles, eg prophet, teacher, healer, etc (cf Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:28). In addition, some were appointed to a clearly defined 'office', eg elder/overseer, deacon (cf Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1:5ff).

The charismatically-based roles are unlikely to have involved 'full-time' ministry. If the recognised officials (elders, deacons) followed their counterparts in the synagogue, it is most likely that they also were in full-time or at least part-time secular employment. The main pieces of evidence for the possibility of full-time elders in New Testament times are 1 Timothy 5:17f, 1 Peter 5:2 and Galatians 6:6. The 'double honour' (1 Tim. 5:17) to be accorded to elders who do a good job in either administration or preaching and teaching is clearly a financial remuneration (or equivalent in kind). The fact that elders might be 'greedy for money' (1 Pet. 5:2; cf 1 Tim. 6:5ff; Tit. 1:11) suggests that they received some monetary reward, presumably on the basis of the principle expressed in Galatians 6:6. It would seem, then, that some of the elders, especially those who specialised in teaching, might not have had other employment or, at least, only a part-time job. The paucity of evidence will take us no further.

As with the itinerant workers, those in a settled ministry are in the first instance responsible to the Lord (cf Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:4). But again, that does not necessarily rule out some accountability or answerability to the local congregation and to an apostle or his delegate (cf Acts 20:17ff; 1 Tim. 5:19f).

Biblical Principles

Even if we cannot be totally sure that there were full-time resident workers in the New Testament church, the practice of having them can be regarded as 'scriptural' if it is compatible with the principles contained in the teaching of scripture.

Gifts and calling

If we ask, What should determine the nature and sphere of an individual's ministry? the New Testament seems to give us two answers.

1. In the first instance, a person's ministry depends on the gift or gifts that God has given: without the requisite gifts no one is able to fulfil any

spiritual ministry (cf Rom. 12:6ff; 1 Cor. 12:7–11; 1 Pet. 4:10f) and 1 Corinthians 12:28 seems to imply that possession of a gift constitutes a divine appointment to a particular role. It is no doubt expected that this divine appointment will be recognised and confirmed by the other members of the church.

2. In some cases, however, the New Testament speaks of a divine ‘calling’ to a particular role or office. Thus Paul received a direct call from God to be an apostle (cf Acts 26:16f; Gal. 1:1, 12, 15f) but also an indirect call via others to embark on a missionary journey (Acts 13:1ff). Timothy’s call to service came through Paul (Acts 16:1ff; 2 Tim. 2:6), but also involved divine confirmation through prophecy, and congregational recognition through laying on of hands by elders (cf 1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14). Elders (and deacons?) were appointed by apostles and apostolic delegates (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5), but this was probably seen as a divine calling and appointment (cf Acts 20:28; NB ‘prayer and fasting’ in Acts 14:23; cf 13:2f). What part the congregation played in this we are not told: presumably they were expected to recognise and endorse the people as divine choices.

If we then ask, What should determine whether a person’s ministry is part-time or full-time? scripture seems to be pointing to two tests.

1. Can the person’s gift/gifts be adequately developed and exercised for the maximum benefit of the church in his/her spare time or do they need more time and scope? Will the church suffer or be deprived if the gifts are not used on a full-time basis?

2. Is God calling the person to full-time service in a particular sphere and has that call been received or confirmed by the congregation and its leaders?

Elders and deacons

The job-description of *elders/overseers* is clearly delineated in the New Testament: authoritative leadership and executive rule of the local church (cf Acts 20:28; 1 Thess. 5:12,17; 1 Tim. 3:5; Tit. 1:7; Heb. 13:17); teaching and pastoral care (cf Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11ff; 1 Tim. 3:3; 1 Pet. 5:2f). (For an expansion of these roles, see the excellent series, ‘Shepherd the flock’, by Neil Summerton in *Harvester* Jan-Nov, 1985). Scripture seems to allow for the possibility that certain elders will specialise in the teaching and pastoral role (cf Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 5:17f) and it is this aspect of the elders’ work which may well demand full-time (or at least part-time)—rather than spare-time—involvement. The scriptural principle of plural leadership would seem to entail that such a full-time elder is not regarded as ‘*the* pastor’ but ‘*a* pastor’ (ie that the other elders also share in the pastoral task, although probably to a lesser extent according to the gift

and time available), not as '*the* teaching elder' but as '*a* teaching elder' (ie that the other elders also share in the teaching, if they have the requisite gift and time). Above all, it means that a full-time elder has no independent authority or executive function, but only the corporate authority which he shares with the leadership group as a whole.

The role of *deacons* (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8ff; cf Rom. 16:1) is nowhere spelled out in the New Testament. It would appear from passages like Acts 6:1–16 (where, however, the word 'deacon' does not occur) that the main task of deacons was to act as 'assistants' to the elders (cf Rom. 16:1; Acts 13:5 uses a different word of similar meaning), although their title (*diakonos*—lit. 'servant') surely refers to their relationship to the congregation, not to the elders! In today's church the role of deacon may be differentiated into specific tasks such as treasurer, house-group leader, pastoral visitor, music leader, Sunday school superintendent, youth leader, etc. Most of these roles can probably be fulfilled quite adequately on a spare-time basis, but the youth leader, for example, might well need to be a full-time occupation. Again, it is important that such a full-time deacon should not dominate the corporate leading and decision-making of the deacons as a group.

Remuneration and responsibility

The main responsibility for the financial support of any full-time (or part-time) settled worker lies with the local church (cf 1 Tim. 5:17f; 1 Thess. 5:12f). The scriptural principles are clear: 'the worker deserves his wages' (1 Tim. 5:18) and 'Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor' (Gal. 6:6). Presumably the Lord's command that 'those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel' (1 Cor. 9:14) applies to full-time resident workers as well as to itinerant apostles or evangelists.

The chief point at issue is whether scripture rules out the provision of an agreed periodic payment or salary. Some would say that the basic principle is that the Lord's servant not in secular employment should look directly to the Lord to supply his needs (cf Phil. 4:19), leaving God to guide others as to when and how much to give to him. This arrangement clearly makes demands on the worker's faith, but may thereby be a means of strengthening it; it may also result in unnecessary strains being placed on a couple in a situation where regular income is essential. A compromise arrangement would be where no promise or agreement is made with the worker, but the church commits itself to a regular gift or payment. On the other hand, one might argue that if it is not wrong for a Christian in secular employment to receive a salary, why is it wrong for one in full-time ministry? The basic scriptural principle is that the onus is on the local

church adequately to support those who give the whole or most of their potential earning time to the work of the local church. Arrangements may be worked out according to the particular wishes and needs of the partners involved without infringing any scriptural principles. The important thing is that whatever system is used it should not be so rigid and mechanical that no room is left for the Spirit to direct additional giving or other modifications.

In some circles the Old Testament practice of giving a tithe to the Levites (cf Num. 18:21ff) is taken as a precedent. All members of a local church are expected to tithe and all this money goes to the pastor and/or full-time elders. Giving to other needs both inside and outside the church must be additional to this tithe. This would seem to be a legalistic application of a provision of the old covenant and therefore against the spirit of the new covenant where the motivation for giving is gratitude and joy rather than duty and obedience (cf 2 Cor. 8 & 9). Nevertheless, it is a reminder of the responsibility of God's people to support those who give themselves full-time to the Lord's service.

Closely linked with the question of upkeep is that of direction and accountability. Do scriptural principles allow a contract of employment or should a full-time worker be totally free to follow the Lord's leading as he receives it directly from the Lord? The scriptural answer seems to be that whilst in the last analysis the Christian worker must be free to follow his own conscience and the guidance he receives directly from the Lord, he must also be subject to the local church he is serving and in particular to the elders (cf Eph. 5:21; Heb. 13:17). Scripture does not seem to encourage the 'free-lance' worker who simply 'does his own thing' (cf Acts 15:24). The Christian worker must expect to receive the Lord's direction through others as well as through individually received guidance, and to find that the two are in agreement (cf Acts 13:1ff; Gal. 2:1-10). If the worker is employed by his local church, he should have a contract of employment ('everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way'—1 Cor. 14:40) which should be flexible enough to allow for his own freedom of conscience. In the last resort he can, if necessary, terminate the agreement. If the worker is supported by ad hoc free will giving, he should not regard himself as independent of the direction and guidance of the local church. He is indeed the Lord's servant first (cf Rom. 14:4; 1 Cor. 3:5ff; 4:1ff), but he is also a servant of the congregation (cf Mark 9:35; 10:43ff; Phil. 2:4ff; 2 Cor. 11:8; 13:4; Gal. 5:13).

Conclusion

It seems, then, that the idea of a resident FTW is biblical, not simply in the sense that some *precedents* can be found in the New Testament picture

of the early Church, but—more importantly—that it is compatible with the *principles* of church life taught in the New Testament. This does not mean, however, that a resident FTW is either necessary or even desirable in any particular situation, only that he/she is scripturally *permissible*. Each church must seek to discover the Lord's will for its own situation at any particular time. A resident FTW should be sought and adopted only if the Holy Spirit so guides and signifies (cf Acts 13:2).