Sunday, November 22, 2026 am

What God Has NOT Joined Together (12)
The Church and General Benevolence

As we continue our 2026 theme, 2 weeks ago we presented a lesson that addresses how God has NOT joined together the church and entertainment. At that time, we gave a very brief introduction to the social gospel, a movement that began in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The movement changed the focus of the church from spiritual to social – tending to the needs of society. This attitude, though perhaps not directly, I believe is a catalyst behind churches turning to entertainment to attract "seekers" (those looking for the gospel) and to keep those who are "saved". Today, we will address an area of concern that is a DIRECT product of the social gospel – the church as a general benevolent organization. In this lesson we want to address what some churches are doing and then show what the Bible says about how the church can use its treasury for benevolent purposes.

I. Some preliminary observations

a. What I am NOT questioning in this lesson:
   i. Whether there is a need for general benevolence. I am not ignoring the fact that the social needs of society ought to be addressed. And that there are inequities that at times are immoral.
   ii. Furthermore, it is something that Christians can and should engage in according to their ability (e.g., Ephesians 4:28, James 1:27, Matthew 25:31-46, etc.).
   iii. Whether or not benevolence is a work of the church. As we shall see, it IS!
   iv. I am not questioning the sincerity or good intentions of congregations (or individuals) that engage in such works. Or that it is a good work within itself.

b. The question is simply – according to God's word, IS it a work of the church? Has God joined together general benevolence as one of the works of the church?

c. What do we mean by ***general benevolence***? *Benevolence* means to perform kind, charitable acts. A gift given out of generosity. (AHD) *General benevolence* is a term that means extending benevolence to address/alleviate societal needs to unbelievers (those outside of the body of Christ) from the treasury of a church.

II. The church and benevolence in scripture.

a. It is an act of fellowship – 2 Cor. 8:4, *For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the grace of* ***sharing*** *in the ministry to the saints*. Paul is speaking of brethren in Macedonia who themselves were very limited in their resources, yet they wanted to help needy saints in Jerusalem. Paul called it an act of fellowship. We have established in previous lessons that fellowship in the Bible is spiritual in nature and involves "sharing" between God's people – the saved.

b. There is a clear pattern in scripture for benevolent responsibilities of the church.

c. There are 3 recorded cases of benevolence in the New Testament
   i. ***Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-37*** – the church cared for its own needy. Early after its establishment, many saints stayed in Jerusalem to learn more about Christ. The apostles were teaching them. There were needs and brethren helped each other within the congregation.
   - Acts 2:44-45 described the closeness of the brethren. They had all things in common (they shared). Contextually, the actions were brethren toward each other.
   - Acts 4:32-37 – again, they took care of each other. Vs. 34 notes, *nor was there anyone* ***among them*** *who lacked*… Among the givers was Barnabas who was very generous. This leads into the sins of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).
   - Acts 6 – there were widows with needs. The Hellenist widows were being neglected. The

apostles called the brethren (multitude of disciples) together and told them to appoint 7 men of good reputation from among themselves to take care of the needs. (1-3). They did so.

ii. ***Acts 11:27-30*** – in Antioch of Syria, Agabus prophesies about a famine throughout the world. Saints determined to send relief to saints throughout Judea. They did so by sending Paul and Barnabas and gave it to the elders. Understanding that elders are limited in their scope to their local congregation (Acts 20:17, 28ff; 1 Peter 5:1-4), it is implied that what was sent was directly distributed to various congregations that had needs (there could have been churches in various cities of Judea including Jerusalem, Bethany, Emmaus, Lydda, Joppa, etc.).

iii. A problem with ***needy saints in Jerusalem that appears later*** – as Paul is concluding his 3rd evangelistic journey, one of its purposes was to collect resources for needy saints in Jerusalem. He actually mentions this in several of his letters.

1. Romans 15:25-26, he is completing his work and headed to Jerusalem. He mentions saints in Macedonia and Achaia - where Corinth is.
2. 1 Corinthians 16:1-3 where Paul gives instructions to collect funds so that when he arrives, they can be delivered to the saints of Jerusalem. This text describes their need to take up the collection and have it ready when he gets there (NOTE: This passage is also our authority for a treasury, WHEN it is to be collected and by whom (saints)).
3. 2 Corinthians 8-9 finds Paul still on his way and he gives more specific instructions. He also commends the brethren of Macedonia for their generosity and desire to have "fellowship" in the work. He then reminds the brethren of Corinth that they HAD committed to help and he urges them to have the gift ready when he arrives. Again this is a "free will offering" of the saints (for the saints). It is to be done with purpose (intention), cheerfully and liberally (9:6-8).

d. Observations about these patterns

i. <u>ALWAYS directed toward needy saints</u> –

1. Every example above shows this.
2. 1 Timothy 5:1-16. Paul describes WHO the church can (and should) help out of its treasury – "qualified" faithful widows.
3. The church is NOT a "pocketbook" for anyone who has a need (or expresses such). The description of the one who can be helped is clearly a Christian who is proven. See vs. 16.
4. ALSO, let us not ignore abuse. Paul stated one reason is that when you help those who ought to help themselves (e.g., younger widows – 1 Timothy 5:11-16; those who refuse to work – 2 Thessalonians 3:10-11, etc.) they become idle and in the process divert resources from those who "widows indeed" (those with genuine needs).

ii. <u>It becomes a work of the church ONLY after all other means have been exhausted</u>.

1. Are brethren taking care of their family?
2. Are we as Christians generous when we see a genuine need? (cf. James 2:14-17, 1 John 3:17-18).
3. NOTE: I know from experience that in this congregation, there have been needs, at times with unbelievers, but especially among members, where others have "out of their own wallets" helped so that we did not need to turn to the church treasury to assist them.
4. ALSO, while not perfect, <u>our government and society has made provisions to take care of the needy and underserved within our communities</u>. As law abiding citizens, we pay our taxes (and possibly donate to charities, which I recommend – cf.

Ephesians 4:28) which supplement these needs. This is a legal means for us to consider BEFORE turning the church into a benevolent organization.

iii. It was always temporary by description. IF the need is there, help with it. But do not make that the mission of the church. There have been churches that have "sponsored" various benevolent works that become a permanent fixture of their identity. That is NOT the purpose of the church and benevolence.

iv. It was accomplished while congregations maintained their autonomy. No benevolent organizations were created, or centralized "fund raisers" for a specific need. Simply stated, when there was a need in another location, resources were directed toward that need. Paul was clear in 1 Corinthians 16:3 that Corinth was to choose how their funds were directed toward the need.

v. It was always sent DIRECTLY to the ones in need. Churches maintained their autonomy. We noted this with the churches of Judea.

vi. It was NEVER used as a means to introduce the gospel. One of the arguments made today for general benevolence is that it is a means to introduce the gospel. But as you look at churches that have made it their mission, by far, the majority are there for "the bread and not the gospel" (cf. John 6:26-27 where Jesus noted they were only seeking Him for the miracles and free meals). Also consider Acts 6:2-4 where the apostles made a distinction between helping needy saints and their work. Vs. 2 noted "*It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables*." After instructing them to about servants to tend to the need they said, "*But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word*." In this they established that benevolence is NOT about proclaiming the gospel. IT is about helping needy saints who are hindered from service because of their physical needs.

e. There is a distinction between what the individual can do and the church can do. The individual CANNOT shift or avoid his responsibilities by delegating it to the local church. This distinction is clear in 1 Timothy 5:16, "do not let the church be burdened."

God has given us a pattern for His church as we frequently discuss. We have a pattern in matters of benevolence also. As you study the New Testament you can see that God has NOT joined together general benevolence with the work of the church. There are things a congregation can do, but there many MORE things, with less barriers, we can do as Christians. Truthfully, Christians OUGHT to be known for their generosity and care for others. But in spite of what man thinks, His pattern DOES work. Let us respect His pattern and its limitations, even in this. Think about it