

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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POVERTY, HOSPITALITY AND THE NEEDY

God has ordained three Covenant institutions on earth: The family, the Church, and the civil authorities. Symbols of these authorities are the rod, the key and the sword. The family (parents) have authority over children but not over an erring brother. That is the authority of the church. The church can discipline a member but not use the sword as punishment. The state has authority to wield the sword as punishment but cannot influence the inner workings of the family or church unless there is a crime committed. When the state over steps its authority and begins to legislate in cases of family and church it is violating its covenant right and obligation. George Grant in his book *Bringing in the Sheaves* wrote: "The government welfare program cannot be reformed. Even a radical restricting of the entire system from top to bottom would be inadequate. The reason? Welfare is not essentially or primarily the government's job. It never has been. And it will never be. Welfare is our job. It is the job of Christians. According to the clear instruction of Scripture, there is only one way to win the 'war on poverty'---get the government out of it and get the church back in it." The authority of the state is limited to preserving order, restraining evil and punishing the evildoers. It is not the right of the state to infringe upon the family and church as we see happening today in our society. Too often the church has relinquished its obligation to care for the needy (even its own) to the state. As a result the church has failed in one of its primary purposes.

In his book *Dissenting Voices* Ulrich Teitelbaum in discussing the hospitality and care for the needy in the early church, wrote: "Even the enemies of the church begrudgingly admitted that there was something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ that compelled Christians to perform extraordinary feats of selfless compassion. For example, during the short reign as emperor in the fourth century, Julian the Apostate tried to restore the paganism of Rome's earlier days and undermine Christianity. But he just could not get around the Christians' works of love. Indeed, in urging his government officials to charitable works, he said 'We ought to be ashamed. Not a beggar is to found among the Jews, and those godless Galileans feed not only their own people, but ours as well, whereas our people receive no assistance whatever from us.'" It seems strange that in trying to restore paganism the emperor urged his government officials to charitable works when charitable works was the hallmark of authentic Christianity. In his state of the Union address in 1964 President Lyndon Johnson declared an "unconditional war on poverty." There is no question about it, the war on poverty has been lost. The reason is the state has overstepped its authority and has usurped the authority of the family and the church. The church's biggest failure today is its failure in benevolence.

Christ's ministry was not confined to evangelism, as important as that was, he goes beyond that when he applies the words of Isaiah to his ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to preach gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set free those that are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18, 19). Hospitality and caring for the needy is a common theme throughout the

Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testaments. The law made provision for the needy: Leviticus 19:9, 10: "Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God." And Deuteronomy 24:20-22: "When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow." The book of Ruth is an example of how this law worked. The book of Proverbs states it in these terms: "He who despises his neighbor sins, but happy is he who is gracious to the poor." (14:21), "He who mocks the poor reproaches his Maker; He who rejoices at calamity will not go unpunished." (17:5), "He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered." (21:13), "He who gives to the poor will never want, but he who shuts his eyes will have many curses." (28:27). According to the prophet Ezekiel the besetting sin of Sodom was not sexual perversion, but rather unconcern for the destitute. "Behold this was the guilt of your sister Sodom; she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy" (Ezek. 16:49). God told Israel through the prophet Isaiah "to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, cover him and not hide yourself from your own flesh" (Isa. 58: 7). The Old Testament is replete with stories of hospitality being extended in the home to strangers and the needy. Some examples are Abraham and Lot inviting strangers into their home for meals and lodging, only to find out they were entertaining angels, the widow of Zarephath and Elijah, and the Shunammite woman and Elisha (Gen. 18-19; I Kings 17:8-24; II Kings 4:8-37). However, it was not only the household that was to practice hospitality, it was the responsibility of all the Israelites: They were to take a basket of the first fruit of the ground to the priest and say "'I have brought the first of the produce of the ground which Thou, O Lord have given to me.' And you shall set it down before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your God...when you have finished paying the tithe of your increase in the third year, the year of tithing, then you shall give to the Levite, to the stranger, to the fatherless and to the widow that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied" (Deuteronomy 26:10-12). In the New Testament is the record of individual households offering hospitality (Acts 9:42-10:48; 16:14-15; 18:1-11) but also the whole church providing hospitality (Acts 2:42-47, 20:7-11; I Cor. 11:17-22, 33,34). The Christian's responsibility to practice hospitality and care for the needy was not confined to believers but was extended to the world. "So then as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal.6:10). "...and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men (I Thess. 3:12). Christine Pohl writes in her book *Making Room*: "offering hospitality in a world distorted by sin, injustice, and brokenness will rarely be easy. We need a combination of grace and wisdom. Substantial hospitality to strangers involves spiritual and more intuition, prayer and dependence on the Holy

Spirit, the accumulated wisdom of tradition, and pragmatic assessment of each situation.”

The epistles have much to say about our practicing hospitality. Paul’s instruction to the Romans was “contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality” (Rom. 12:13). The Hebrew writer instructs his readers to “let love of the brethren continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:1, 2). The Apostle Paul was deeply committed to helping the poor (Gal. 2:10). Not long after his conversion there was a famine in all the world and the believers in Antioch “in proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea, and this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders” (Acts 11:29, 30). His final trip to Jerusalem, after his second missionary journey, which resulted in his arrest and later his voyage to Rome as a prisoner, was to take an offering from the Gentile Christians to the Jewish Christians (Acts 24:17). Paul’s instructions concerning this offering are recorded in II Corinthians 8 and 9.

When we speak of our obligation toward the poor, the needy and the stranger, some questions must be dealt with. In a fallen and disordered world there are many who will take advantage of both the individual Christian and especially the church. The question arises about the deserving and the undeserving when we are faced with requests for help. There is also in certain cases risks and danger to the one helping others (especially strangers). These incidents may be very infrequent but they can be dangerous and devastating. To those who would steal from others (this is what the undeserving do), Paul instructs them to “Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who is in need” (Eph. 4:28). And to the Thessalonians he wrote: “For when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread” (II Thess. 3:10-12). But he adds “But as for you brethren, do not grow weary of doing good” (ver. 13). Just because there are scams that will take advantage of us is no reason for not helping those in need. The early church had a system of caring for widows who had no family to take care of them, but they had to meet certain qualification before they “were put on the list” (I Tim. 5:3-16). Herbert Schlossberg in his book *Idols for Destruction* comments on this passage: “No theory of helping the poor may be said to be Christian if it does not discriminate among the poor. The old distinction, now despised among social workers, between the deserving and undeserving poor is a reflection of a biblical theme. It has a sanctimonious ring to it because sanctimonious people have misused it, but that should not blind us to the soundness of the conception. When widows were enrolled in the distribution of charity, they had to be widows indeed, which is to say truly destitute, without family members able to care for them (I Tim. 5:5). This was intended that the community’s resources should not be wasted and that self-respect should not be destroyed by continued dependency.” In spite of the difficulties we sometimes face in helping the needy, this should not hinder us from reaching out to those who truly need our help.

HEBREWS 1 AND MAHERSHALALHASHBAZ

Before it became chic for young couples to name their children after soap opera stars and rock band celebrities, it was common to give them Bible names. However, there are some Bible names most people would avoid. For example, who would name their little boy “Cain” or their beautiful little girl “Jezebel”? There is one Bible name I am sure will never be found on a birth certificate: Mahershalalhashbaz! (Maher-shalal-hash-baz). Yet he was the son of the Old Testament’s greatest prophet: Isaiah, and the name was given him by God (Isaiah 8:3). The name meant “swift is the spoil, speedy is the plunder” and the message God was sending through Isaiah by instructing him to give his son this name was that “before the boy knows how to cry out ‘My father’ or ‘My mother’” the king of Assyria would have taken Israel captive. It is no surprise that the Hebrew writer said that “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son...” (Heb. 1:1, 2). The “last days” usually refer to the last days of the Old Covenant and the Jewish system. They are in the past and not future. Many conclude that the “last days” spoken of in the New Testament refer to the last days of the Church or the misleading “church age”. This is not warranted by the biblical texts. The “last days” were the early days of the church and the inauguration of the New Covenant era. The passage above (Heb. 1:1, 2) shows that the “last days” were when God spoke by His Son. Another example is Peter’s quotation from Joel 2: “This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh...’” What was happening that day was a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. Some have taken Paul’s warning to Timothy that “In the last days some will fall away from the faith...” (I Tim. 4:1) to be the last days before the coming of Christ, but in verse 6 he tells him to “point out these things to the brethren” showing it was a danger then. Also in II Timothy 3:1-4 when he is speaking of the perilous times that were coming “in the last days” and describes the characteristics of some men in that day, he tells Timothy to “avoid such men as these”. This shows the warning was concerning men in that day. This does not say these Scriptures cannot be applied to our day, but Paul is warning of what would happen in his time. In commenting on Hebrews 9:22-10:6 Dr. Gary North in his book *Rapture Fever* writes: “The inescapable commitment of Jesus’ sacrifice at Calvary was His annulment of the Old Covenant’s sacrificial system, *which took place at the end of Old Covenant world*. Notice the phrase in 9:26 ‘in the end of the world’ (KJV). In the original Greek, it reads: ‘completion of the age.’ This phrase must be taken literally, but its literal frame of reference was the fall of Jerusalem and the annulment of the temple’s sacrificial system. The author was therefore prophesying the imminent end of national Israel as God’s covenant people.” The NASV translates “at the end of the world” as “the consummation” and shows it was at that time that Jesus was “manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” Thus it was in “these last days” of the Jewish system that God spoke by His Son. “God spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and many ways.” He did not speak through His Son in the Old Testament rather it was in “these last days” of the Jewish System. God commanding Isaiah to name his son Mahershalalhashbaz is one illustration of God speaking to the fathers in many portions and many ways.

