

Dear Aebi: *"Should the church be involved with helping the needy, widows, orphans, etc. without relying on government organizations? Basically, what should the mission of the church be?"*



The basic mission of the church is to glorify God and to save the lost. That the church is to glorify God is stated in Ephesians 3:21— “to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus...” The church assembles to give God glory in worship by singing, praying, giving, and teaching. We glorify God in our partaking of the Lord’s supper. Those who make fun of the church as “a worship society” fail to recognize that God intended it to do just that, else why would He have had the apostles set worship in the church as the basic reason for our assembling together? Why would He have given us instructions on how to give, how to partake of the Lord’s supper, how to sing, or how to pray? To worship God is to glorify God, and this was understood in both the New Testament and the Old Testament, though the manner of worship under the New Testament is different from what it was under the Old. The basic mission of the church also involves saving the lost. The great commission was understood to apply to others than the apostles. Paul the apostle passed on his teaching responsibilities to Timothy and told him to pass them on to others: “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2, NKJV). The invitation to come to Christ is extended by the church, the bride of Christ: “And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” (Rev. 22:17). The church glorifies God not only by worship, but also by proclaiming the gospel to save the lost. Both are stressed in the New Testament.

But from the beginning of the church in Acts 2, it has also been understood that the church has a responsibility to those of its number who are needy. Acts 2:44-45 and Acts 4:32-37 speak of the members of the Jerusalem church sharing with the needy by selling their lands and houses, then bringing the money to the apostles to distribute to needy Christians. Ananias and Sapphira’s sin was in connection with giving to help needy members (Acts 5:1-11). In Acts 6, the church was caring for so many Greek-speaking Christian widows that the apostles appointed a committee of seven men to be in charge of providing them food. Acts 11:27-30 says that the church at Antioch (Syria) sent money to the poor brethren living in Judea. In Acts 24:17 Paul refers to a contribution from Gentile churches he had brought to Jerusalem for poor Jewish saints. This is also referred to in Romans 15:25-26 and Galatians 2:10 and figures strongly in Paul’s discussion of giving in 2 Corinthians 8-9.

While it was not the mission of the church to help the poor, they viewed it as their responsibility to do so when there was a need and they could help. It is true that all the cases cited above were to help brethren or saints – members of the churches of Christ. Has the church any responsibility to help those who are not members? Yes; Galatians is addressed to churches of

Christ in Galatia (Galatians 1:2), and Paul in Galatians 6:10 says we have an obligation when we have opportunity to help all men, especially our brethren (“those who are of the household of faith”). But even this passage indicates that our first obligation is to brethren.

The question at the beginning of this article asked if the church rather than the government should help the needy. Certainly the church should not object to government assistance to poor people, and the church doesn't have enough resources to be a welfare society. In many cases we don't have enough to support all the needy saints, let alone outsiders. I see no reason why we should try to replace government assistance to the poor, but at times we may need to supplement it. Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:3-14 that close relatives should care for older Christian widows so that the church will not have to do it. In Acts 2, 4, 5, 6, and 12, there seem to have been emergencies that necessitated benevolence, and there are many kinds of emergencies—famines, floods, persecutions, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, etc. Emergencies may involve groups of people, or they may involve individuals. It becomes increasingly evident that even the government cannot provide for all physical needs, let alone the church. Welfare needs can expand beyond the capacity of any group to fill all of them.

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