

Who Should Support Missionaries?

By Dr. David A. DeWitt

- *Should missionaries raise their own support?*
- *Should missionaries be supported “full-time” or have a secular job?*
- *Should missionaries be supported by individuals or churches?*

Giving, in General

First, we shall look briefly at the basic New Testament principles for giving. Then we will apply them to missionaries, using specific biblical passages which refer to missionary support.

(1) **In the Bible, tithing was not giving.** [The Hebrew word for “tithe” means “tenth part.”] Tithing was a tax system in Israel. There was one tithe for the Levites (Leviticus 27:30-33), one tithe to be consumed in a banquet (Deuteronomy 12:5-18), and one tithe taken every third year, especially for the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). The annual tithe averages out to about 22.3%.

In the New Testament, only bad guys tithed (Matthew 23:23, Luke 18:12). The only positive reference is to Abraham’s Old Testament tithe (Hebrews 7:1-10).

(2) **Giving is a way to serve God.** *It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20:35; see also Luke 6:38; Mark 12:41-44; 2 Corinthians 8:6-11).

(3) **Giving is an act of maturity.** Learning to give and learning where, when, and how to give, is one of life’s greatest challenges. Giving reflects love and maturity (2 Corinthians 8:7-9).

(4) **Giving should primarily supply the needs of other believers.** It’s godly to give to anyone in need, but the priority of our giving should be to the needs or blessing of believers in Christ (2 Corinthians 8:4, 12-14).

(5) **Giving should be a desire of the giver, not a demand of the receiver.** Giving should be done because someone is aware of a need and desires to contribute to it. Giving should be initiated by the giver. It should not be the result of the receiver coercing the giver or making him feel guilty (2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 7; 9:7).

(6) **Giving should be into and out of a personal storehouse.** On a regular basis, we should give money into a personal collection place (bank account, sugar bowl, etc.). Then we should distribute that money as God makes needs known (1 Corinthians 16:2). [The storehouse mentioned in Malachi 3:10 was in Israel’s Temple and distributed by Israel’s priests. But remember, today the individual believer is both the priest (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6) and the temple (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19-20). Therefore, today the believer is both the collector and the distributor.]

(7) **Collective spending is not giving.** To put money into a building, parking lot, or paying your preacher’s salary, which we all utilize, is collective spending, not giving. Collective spending may indeed be good, for example, paying your teachers (1 Timothy 5:17-18), but it’s not giving.

(8) **People who are given to or supported should also be giving and supporting.**

Giving to Missionaries

Now we shall turn our attention to the specific application of these principles to missionaries. [A missionary is here defined as one who goes out for the sake of the Name (of Christ), 3 John 7-8.] We will consider New Testament passages that specifically deal with their support, in the order which they occur in the Bible.

(1) **Missionaries should have a team of people who want to support them (Luke 8:1-4).** Jesus was (among other things, of course) a missionary. He did not need anyone's financial support. Anyone who can turn water into wine and feed thousands of people from a few loaves and fishes does not need support. Yet Jesus had a group of people who traveled with Him, consisting of (1) the 12 apostles (and sometimes the apostles' wives - 1 Corinthians 9:5), (2) some women He healed, and (3) some wealthy women.

Jesus and the apostles received gifts from people contributing to their support out of their private means (Luke 8:3)

(2) **Missionaries should be supported by the people they minister to (Luke 10:1-7).** (See also 1 Timothy 5:17-18; 1 Corinthians 9:9-12; and Galatians 6:6.) The New Testament is very clear on this, repeating the phrase of the Mosaic Law, *you shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing* (Deuteronomy 25:4). Jesus said, *the laborer is worthy of his wages* (Luke 10:7). Paul emphasized this to Timothy (1 Timothy 5:18). There is a sense in which this is more a principle of paying than giving, but it is definitely a basic part of missionary support. It's not the only source, of course, since many recipients of missionary ministry are not capable of much support. Nevertheless, they should share some of what they have with the missionaries.

(3) **Missionaries should be supported by sources other than just those they minister to (Acts 18:3, 5).** (See also 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and Philippians 4:16.) Missionaries should not be a financial burden to those they disciple. If they depend on the people they minister to for support, they will likely be, or be seen as, a burden. Hence many missionaries are continually at odds with their local boards or committees over fund raising. Additional funding might come from a job or other supporters. Paul utilized both, although Jesus does not seem to have had a secular job after His ministry began. In any case, the missionaries were not dependent on the support of their disciples.

(4) **Missionaries should remind people to support missionaries (1 Corinthians 9:11-14).** Paul reminded the Corinthians, *If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you?* (1 Corinthians 9:11). This is not to say the missionaries should demand support or somehow pressure people to give to them (v. 12). On the contrary, the missionary should go without the support of anyone who doesn't desire to give to his ministry.

Reminding people of the ministry of giving is part of the missionaries' job of discipleship.

(5) **Missionaries should be supported by people wishing to participate in their ministry (Philippians 1:5, 7; 4:15-18; 3 John 7-8).** In Philippians Paul thanked them for their abundant gifts which they sent him more than once, while he was in Thessalonica (the town he went to after Philippi--Philippians 4:16). But they also sent him a gift while he was in Corinth, which he says *fully supplied my need* (2 Corinthians 11:9). Paul had some substantial contributors in Macedonia, especially in Philippi, whose gifts allowed him to be able to stop making tents and begin *devoting himself completely to the Word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ* (Acts 18:3-5). We might guess Lydia was a large contributor, since she appears to be wealthy and the church met in her home (Acts 16:13-15, 40). But whoever was involved, their motive was to participate in Paul's ministry--which Paul said he desired because of *the profit which increases for your account* (Philippians 4:17). So giving has a profit motive--heavenly profit for earthly financial participation in the Gospel (Matthew 6:19).

(6) **Missionaries should be supported by individuals who desire to do so (3 John 5-11).** In the little book (letter) of 3 John, the Apostle John wrote to his friend Gaius to encourage him and commend him for his support of itinerant missionaries. Gaius' gift was interesting in that it was given over the objection of his church (and the church leader, Diotrephes), who apparently had Gaius put out of the church (verse 10). A group of believers (a church) might join together to support someone (Philippians 4:15), but each gift is the support of some individual believer who desires to do so.

There is not one single example, command, or suggestion in the New Testament that anyone ever gave or should give to their own local church.

Giving was from people to people. Institutional giving is, therefore, optional. It's neither commanded nor prohibited. It may be valuable for legal or tax purposes, depending on the laws of the land. But the organization should function as a direct pipeline from the giver to the missionary, not as an institution which decides who will be supported.

Questions and Answers

Q: *Should missionaries raise their own support?*

A: Yes. Each missionary is responsible for establishing a team of people who voluntarily support him or her because they are eager to participate in his or her ministry.

Q: *Should missionaries be supported “full-time” or have a secular job?*

A: Both ways are biblical, but it would seem to be preferable to have full support, unless the mission itself is part-time. Jesus, it seems, was no longer a carpenter after His full-time ministry began, and Paul abandoned tent making when he received enough gift(s) to live on.

Q: *Should missionaries be supported by individuals or churches?*

A: In the New Testament, churches were simply groups of individuals. The idea of being supported by an institution instead of by people who personally know the missionary is foreign to the New Testament.