

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



September 18, 2011

The Jerusalem Relief Mission

A large-scale relief mission among first-century churches provides lessons on how churches can cooperate today—and the limits to that cooperation.

“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also; on the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me” (1 Cor. 16: 1-4)

In the conflict over institutionalism that raged among churches of Christ during the mid-twentieth century, the Jerusalem relief mission was often referenced in discussions of the benevolent work of the church. This passage is one of several in the New Testament that describe this relief mission that Paul arranged in behalf of the poor saints in Jerusalem (see also Gal. 2:9-10, 2 Cor. 8-9, and Rom. 15:25-33). Additional hints are found in Acts that link Paul’s journeys (esp. the third) to this benevolent mission (see Ac. 20:4; 24:17).

Space does not allow here a thorough review of all these sources, but we

can draw attention to several important lessons that emerge from a study of this New Testament event.

First, this relief mission teaches us that local churches can cooperate with each other in working toward a wider aim. Clearly, all those Gentile churches that participated in this effort were cooperating in achieving a greater purpose that no single church could achieve by itself. A similar pattern can be seen in how churches supported preachers in their work of spreading the gospel (2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 4:14-18). Church cooperation is a perfectly legitimate function, and charges that we are “anti-cooperation” are without merit.

However, this cooperation has its limits. It is clear from Paul’s handling of this mission that each congregation had a direct connection to the end goal of the mission. Notice that Paul commanded the Corinthians to send their gift directly to Jerusalem by “whomever you approve.” In Acts 20:4, we read a list of several men—with the churches they represented—who were on their way to Jerusalem. These “messengers of the

churches” (2 Cor. 8:23) were the direct connection between the contributing churches and the end recipients of their charity. The congregations that participated in this mission did not send funds to some kind of centralized agency—another church or a relief organization—who determined the final distribution. These churches were not merely collection agencies; they had a direct, personal involvement in the final distribution of their own funds. They were cooperating in a larger work, but they remained autonomous, independent, and fully responsible for everything they did.

One more observation: The first century world was riddled with poverty and destitution; yet we never read in the New Testament of churches mounting large campaigns to address wider social issues of hunger, homelessness, etc. Charity at the congregational level was limited to fellow saints, as a practical tool of self-preservation. Addressing the broader needs of mankind was the task of individual Christians, working in their daily lives as shining lights doing good to all (Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:15).

– David King