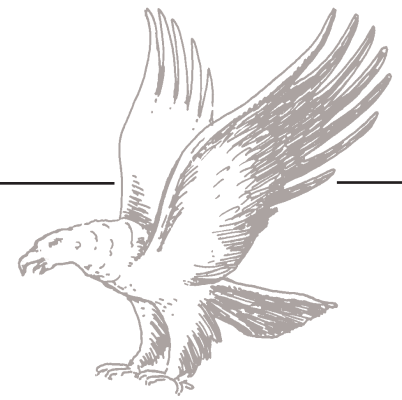


# Wings

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



November 10, 2013

## Churches and Good Works

The notion of churches as purveyors of community charity is deeply ingrained in our culture. But in the New Testament, churches had a different role, and charity had a different source.

*"Let our people also learn to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful" (Titus 3:14).*

*"If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows" (1 Tim. 5:15).*

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In a culture that is dominated by religious charities, we are automatically programmed to link "good works" with "church." Charitable activities are a large line item in the budgets of most churches today. Soup kitchens, homes for senior citizens or troubled youth, hospitals and clinics, homeless shelters, counseling services — the list could go on and on of all the good works that churches are involved in.

Without doubt, these ministries accomplish much good. But at what cost? When churches devote so much of their time and attention (not to mention money) to charity, are they fulfilling the Lord's mission? Or are they being distracted from a more important task?

These two texts from Paul's letters to a couple of young preachers highlight a tension that is often overlooked in discussing this question. True, our people must "learn to maintain good works." But "let not the church be burdened" suggests there are limits to that work. What are those limits, and how can we determine them?

A good place to start would be to compile a list of all the examples of *congregational* benevolence in the New Testament. Space prohibits a full review, but the common theme in all these examples (including the Timothy text) is that *churches took care of their own*. Church charity, in other words, was a practical means of self-preservation, not a quest to cure all the ills of humanity.

Curiously, that boundary does not exist for *individual believers*. Echoing the spirit of the Good Samaritan, Paul encouraged believers to "do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). His instruction to Titus falls in this category as well. As individuals, our lives encounter a wide range of human needs. So as

individuals, we should be active in responding to those needs, either privately or through whatever charitable organizations are available.

This distinction between *limited congregational charity* and *unlimited individual charity* preserves the unique role of the church as God's agent for evangelizing the world and training His people (Matt. 28:19-20; Eph. 4:11-13). When churches ignore this distinction and take on the task of trying to address directly all the social and physical ills of humanity, their primary mission invariably gets sidetracked and weakened.

(By the way, this distinction is not unique to a sub-set of churches of Christ. A number of conservative Reformed churches, following Abraham Kuypers' concept of "sphere sovereignty," make a similar distinction. See Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, p. 144-145.)

Whatever the cultural norm might be, we need to respect God's plan: Let the church focus on doing what it does best, and let individuals shine the light of God's grace by being active in good works in their personal lives.

— David King