

ON THE SUPPORT OF THE MINISTRY

Double Honor

What a Congregation Owes Its Pastor

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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The question came around again this week, posed over one of those gradient graphics that drift across the feed: how much do you think a pastor should make, and why? The comments went where they always go. One man had met a nondenominational “pastor” pulling in more than most of the people in his pews, with no theological training to show for it. Another figured that, training or not, a man of God simply should not out-earn the average person he serves.

The instinct is understandable. It is also, as it happens, running in exactly the wrong direction.

Scripture has a settled answer to this question. It is not the answer most people expect. The Bible’s concern about a pastor’s wages does not lean toward “make sure he doesn’t get too much.” It leans the other way, and it leans hard. Do not muzzle the ox.

The text that settles it

Paul writes to Timothy: “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages’” (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

Start with that phrase, double honor. The Greek word behind honor is *timē*, and it carries two senses at once. It means esteem, the respect owed to an office. It also means value, worth, price. The same word shows up when the New Testament talks about the price paid for something (Acts 4:34, Matthew 27:6). So when Paul says the faithful elder is worthy of double *timē*, he is not handing out compliments. He is talking about honor that has weight to it, honor you can deposit. Respect and remuneration in a single breath.

Notice who receives it especially: those who labor in the word and doctrine. The men in the pulpit and the study, wearing themselves out over the text so the flock can be fed. The harder the labor in the Word, the clearer the claim.

Then Paul does something worth pausing over. He backs the point with two proofs and calls them both “Scripture.” The first is Moses: “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain” (Deuteronomy 25:4). If the beast doing the work may eat as it works, how much more the man. The second, “the laborer is worthy of his wages,” comes from the lips of Jesus in Luke 10:7. Paul quotes the Lord’s own words and sets them alongside Moses as equally the Word of God. That is a small window onto how the earliest church already regarded the Gospels, but the immediate point is blunt: the man who works deserves his pay, and God said so twice.

A consistent witness

This is not a stray verse. It is the settled pattern of the whole Bible.

Paul devotes most of an entire chapter to it in 1 Corinthians 9. He piles up the analogies: the soldier does not go to war at his own expense, the man who plants a vineyard eats its grapes, the shepherd drinks of the flock's milk (1 Corinthians 9:7). He reaches back and grabs the ox again from Deuteronomy 25 (1 Corinthians 9:9). He points to the temple, where those who served at the altar received their portion from the altar (1 Corinthians 9:13). And then he lands it: "Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14). Not suggested. Commanded.

The pattern goes back further still. Under the old covenant the Levites received no land of their own, because the LORD Himself was their inheritance, and the tithes of the tribes supported their service at the tabernacle (Numbers 18:20-24). The provision for those who handle holy things is stitched into the fabric of Israel long before Paul ever picked up a pen. When he draws the line from altar to pulpit, he is not innovating. He is reading his Bible.

And Paul makes the duty personal and near, not abstract: "Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches" (Galatians 6:6). The people in the seats, taught week by week, owe a share of their good things to the man who does the teaching.

There is one nuance worth naming, because it guards against misuse. Paul, who argues the minister's right to support more forcefully than anyone, often waived that right in his own case and made tents (1 Corinthians 9:15). But look closely at what he does with his own example. He forgoes the wage as a free gift for the sake of the Gospel; he never once suggests the congregation is off the hook for owing it. The right is real even when a man lays it down. A pastor may choose to serve at cost. A congregation does not get to choose that cost for him and call it his sacrifice.

Luther put it in the Catechism

Confessional Lutherans have no excuse for being fuzzy here, because Luther wrote this duty straight into the Small Catechism. In the Table of Duties, under what hearers owe their pastors, he strings together the very texts we have been reading: Galatians 6:6, then 1 Timothy 5:17-18, then 1 Corinthians 9:14. The support of the minister is not filed under optional generosity. It sits in the catechism next to the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, as part of the ordinary Christian life a congregation is catechized to live.

Behind that lies the Lutheran understanding of the office itself. The Augsburg Confession teaches that God instituted the office of preaching, giving the Gospel and the Sacraments, so that we might obtain the faith that justifies (AC V). And it insists that no one takes up that office on his own initiative; a man teaches and administers the Sacraments publicly only when rightly called (AC XIV). That is precisely the difference the Facebook commenter was groping toward with his scare quotes around “pastors.” There is a real distinction between a rightly called servant of the Word and a religious entrepreneur who ordained himself. The call matters. The office is God’s, not the man’s.

Luther felt the sting of this personally. He watched congregations that had lavished money on monks and indulgences under the papacy suddenly discover thrift the moment they were asked to feed a faithful evangelical preacher. He did not mince words about the ingratitude of people who would let the man who brought them the Gospel go hungry. The Reformation recovered the free Gospel; it did not abolish the laborer’s wage.

Two ditches

There are two ways to fall off this road, and honesty requires naming both.

The first ditch is the hireling. Peter warns the elders to shepherd the flock “not for dishonest gain but eagerly” (1 Peter 5:2), and Paul says an overseer must not be greedy for money (Titus 1:7). The prosperity preacher milking his people for a private jet is a genuine scandal, and I suspect that caricature is what actually drives most of the unease in threads like the one that started this. Fair enough. That man is condemned by the same Scriptures that command his support, because he has made the ministry a business and the sheep his revenue.

But there is a second ditch on the other side of the road, and we are far too comfortable in it. Call it the muzzled ox. It is the congregation that keeps its pastor anxious and underpaid, that lets him moonlight to cover the mortgage, that quietly resents any comfort in the parsonage, and that dresses all of this up as humility. It is not humility. There is an old principle worth remembering here: *abusus non tollit usum*, the abuse of a thing does not cancel its right use. The televangelist’s greed does not turn plain provision into worldliness. A church that starves its pastor is not being modest. It is disobeying a command God saw fit to give twice.

That second ditch is the one the “he shouldn’t out-earn the average person” reasoning walks straight into. It sounds pious. It quietly swaps the biblical measure for a worldly one. Scripture never sets the pastor’s support by the median income of the county. It sets

it by the labor: is the man giving himself to the Word, and is he freed to keep doing so? That is the yardstick.

What double honor looks like

Strip away the abstractions and it comes to something plain. Double honor means a living wage, so the man is not lying awake over bills instead of over his sermon. It means housing that does not shame his family. It means enough margin to show hospitality, to educate his children, to take a day of rest, and above all not to have to take a second job that pulls him out of the study and away from the sickbed. Paul told Timothy that a soldier does not entangle himself in the affairs of civilian life (2 Timothy 2:4). We entangle our pastors and then wonder why they burn out.

None of this is charity to the pastor. It is the congregation's own investment in the ministry of the Word among them, and Scripture frames it as their privilege, not their burden. The people who share their good things with the one who teaches are not doing him a favor. They are guarding the thing they most need.

And the balance runs both ways, which is why this essay is not a raise request. The same Paul who demands the minister's wage warns the minister himself that the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Timothy 6:6-10). The congregation owes generous support. The pastor owes contentment. Double honor from the one side, and a heart free of avarice on the other. When both are in place, the man is neither fleeced nor fleecing, and he is free to do the one thing he was called to do.

The Christ who sends him

Underneath all of it is a word from Jesus that reframes the whole question. "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me" (Matthew 10:40). How a congregation treats the man who brings them the Word is, finally, how they are treating the One who sent him. To honor the faithful pastor is to honor Christ. To muzzle him is to wave off the labor Christ Himself commanded be paid.

So the answer to "how much should a pastor make" is not a number, and it is certainly not a ceiling. It is double honor, rendered gladly, to a rightly called man doing the actual work. Anything less is not humility. It is a muzzle we have no right to fit.