



Generosity and sacrifice

A comment on the synod report

A3a Articles series: Structures

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The Church of England report *Generosity and sacrifice*, ref GS 1408, was the 2001 report of the Clergy Stipends Review Group. This supplementary note assumes familiarity with the report, though it is now over 22 years since it was published. This paper is therefore somewhat dated although its principles stand.

Overview

I applaud the attempt to look at the issue of clergy stipends (which is much wider than the topic of differentials) from a biblical perspective. The material is helpful but I find the argument in favour of differentials to be flawed.

It seems to assume its conclusion (that differentials based on seniority should continue) and then work backwards to justify this. So it redefines 'stipend' in terms of office and responsibility (2.81) to make differentials a possible part of the package. It holds up one organisation's system (Tearfund) as a model as though to justify its own conclusion. And it comes across as very defensive.

Where I fully agree with the writers is in their point that the 1943 definition of stipend is completely inconsistent with the payment of differentials (2.8) and that 'maintenance allowance' is a poor phrase. But they do not seem to consider the possibility that the 1943 thinking was correct and the subsequent practice wrong.

Reward

The biblical material here (2.26) is helpful. But this does nothing either way for the argument about differentials. The 72 disciples may have looked to receive their due reward for their labours, but there is no verse that states that the apostles stayed in five-star accommodation while the others had to make do with bed and breakfast! The argument is about level of payment, not the differences between people holding different levels of responsibility.

Double payment

A key part of the argument in 2.41 hinges on the meaning of 1 Timothy 5:17,18. The report argues for double honour and double payment. But they admit that this is only one possible interpretation ("at least one Greek Lexicon supports this ...", so presumably others do not!). Stott disagrees with their interpretation in the BST series. And Guthrie (who they cite in a footnote) argues that the word translated honour

means remuneration (that is not in doubt) but says nothing about differentials, focusing instead on proper levels of provision.

But just say the authors are correct and the verse does mean double payment. It is then teachers and preachers who receive this. I sense a strong argument, in this case, for paying parish clergy double that given to Archdeacons! But the most natural meaning of this verse again seems to imply adequate provision for Bible teachers, not a system of differential salaries among such teachers. And general Bible principles of leaders serving rather than lording it over others would surely support this.

The conclusion in 2.49

All these points are fine except for the first one on page 20. It is in no way "clear" that we can have "higher" payments to some than to others. And you cannot logically argue, as the writers seem to do, that this implies differentials based on levels of responsibility among clergy. Once again the argument jumps from giving proper honour to teachers, to paying different levels of stipend to various groups of clergy.

The counter-culture model

I am very unhappy with paragraph 2.60. Here the writers put the argument against their views in such a way that they can shoot it down. In 2.59 and 2.60 it does not have to mean that you have to pay differentials based on need, and the wording "widely different circumstances" and "significantly different stipends" cannot be justified. The argument about retail price index is ludicrous. It would be quite possible to peg a stipend to an appropriate level based on other professions if necessary. The counter-culture model would be to pay everyone the same at a reasonable, not a hardship, level. To say in 2.76 that the counter-cultural model is wanting in Scripture is true in terms of just maintenance allowance, but the issue is one of differentials, not the level of payment.

New definition of stipend

In 2.82 I would prefer "remuneration for the exercise of ministry" rather than "office" as the writers use this word to justify differentials by levels of seniority! They then bring in the word 'responsibility' – which means they are defining 'stipend' to mean just what they want it to mean.

Child allowance

The writers argue against child allowances in 3.19 and 3.20. I see practical problems with child allowances but if we opt to pay all clergy the same but to be concerned about issues of need, it is quite valid to consider them. However, the report is correct to dismiss the issue once the writers have opted for their new definition of stipend. But if their case for that is faulty, then their dismissal of any consideration of child allowance has to be so too.

Conclusion

The report muddles up issues of adequate remuneration, ie. the overall level of payment, and differentials between different people who are paid. It takes Scriptural arguments for proper payment (which are not in doubt) and uses them to justify differentials. This does not follow.

- I fully agree that the 1943 position is untenable.
- The Scriptures they use point to generous payment to those who labour for the gospel, so 'maintenance allowance' is not a happy phrase to use.
- The argument for paying generously is a strong one from Scripture and I am glad they have brought this out. But this is a different issue.
- The report makes no case for differentials by level of responsibility. If it justifies any type of differential at all, it is for teachers and nothing to do with seniority.

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