

The Responsibilities of a Bi-vocational Pastor

Pastors needn't serve full-time nor be compensated to be considered true pastors. Although they must meet biblical qualifications and our standards for ordination, they do not need to possess formal theological training. They may serve part-time with or without compensation.

Although we call such pastors bi-vocational pastors (the term "lay elders" is also used) as a convenient way to distinguish them from full-time pastors, this in no way communicates a diminished role or importance in the church. The Bible allows us to ordain part-time pastors or those who will be uncompensated for their service. Christian prudence, the needs of the church, the lack of finances, as well as a desire to achieve plurality with well-qualified pastors who are already vocationally employed in other roles are some viable reasons to employ bi-vocational pastors.

The Principles of Compensating a Bi-vocational Pastor

As desirable as a bi-vocational role may be for the health and mission of the church, we should aspire for pastors to be compensated commensurate to their workload when possible (1 Cor. 9:6-14; Luke 10:7/Matt. 10:10; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). The New Testament teaches that this is so pastors can be free to devote themselves to their ministries.

"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "the laborer deserves his wages." (1 Tim. 5:17-18)

Paul's first point here has to do with the relative levels of gifting ("rule well"), scopes of responsibility ("especially those who labor in preaching and teaching"), and apparently financial compensation ("double honor") of elders in a given church. That they are compensated seems assumed by the mention of "double honor," and especially by the next verse about "the laborer" deserving his "wages."

His second point is about the need to compensate the elder financially. He is the "ox" who should not be "muzzled" by refusing to compensate him; he is the "laborer" who "deserves his wages" (v. 18). To fail to support him financially can limit his ability and is thus "muzzling the ox." That is a bad thing according to Paul, for it means appointing him to do the work and then hindering him from doing it.

Of course, a church may be unable to fully financially support a pastor and there is nothing that forbids a pastor from other employment. Additionally, serving bi-

vocationally may best serve the needs and mission of the local church depending on the particular pastor, his gifting, life-situation, and availability to serve full time. Viable alternatives to full-time compensation include providing stipends for preaching and teaching, providing a book allowance, or compensating at a part-time level. In some cases, a pastor may simply enjoy being able to serve free of charge. However, if this is not the case and the church is financially able to remunerate him, then the local eldership and congregation should give due consideration to the biblical onus to “not muzzle the ox” and consider financial compensation.

As helpful, wise, and fitting as it may be to employ bi-vocational pastors with alternative compensation arrangements, there is no clear biblical warrant to withhold pay from an pastor merely to create a certain number of volunteer pastors for the sake of balancing the amount of compensated pastors. Some have believed this provides accountability for compensated pastors who may experience a conflict of interest due to receiving compensation from the church they serve. While the concept of a balance of power is a good thing when it comes to civil government, the Scriptures never teach that a special category of volunteer or “lay elders” should be appointed for the purpose of “balancing” the power of the compensated pastors. A biblical answer to such a need is a plurality of pastors.

Financial Responsibility

The bi-vocational pastor must be willing and able to provide financial and material support for his household. His appointment may or may not provide him compensation. There is no implicit agreement to compensate a bi-vocational pastor in the future.

The Work of a Bi-vocational Pastor

The bi-vocational pastor agrees to participate in the life and ministry of the local eldership. His availability may increase or decrease in season. However, unless relieved of his duties, he is committed to sharing the responsibilities of shepherding the church with his fellow pastors.

Participation in Extra-Local Governance

The bi-vocational pastor is a member of the governing body of our denomination. As such, he must make efforts to participate faithfully in his assigned Regional Assembly of Elders and all other elected offices.