

‘The Concept of ‘Living by Faith’’

Harold H. Rowdon

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The phrase ‘living by faith’ is very often used among Christians in a technical and limited sense to mean receiving one’s financial support for Christian service through unsolicited gifts. Dr Rowdon’s incisive study of the ideology behind this practice ends with a gentle appeal that we allow the phrase to fall into disuse. This is because, in his opinion, the practice itself has little biblical warrant and is not to be commended as a *universal* method for those involved in Christian service.

Why the practice has been so earnestly commended and followed, particularly within mission circles and particularly amongst the Brethren, is a matter of real interest, and one on which Dr Rowdon’s chapter throws considerable light. The biblical and theological warrant for the practice is so tenuous (again this is ably demonstrated in the chapter) that it seems altogether necessary to look for some historical and contextual reasons to explain the widespread incidence of the practice.

Firstly, the early Brethren missionaries who ‘lived by faith’ often preferred to maintain a vigorous independence. For them receiving a salary meant an unacceptable degree of human control. ‘Human’—human wisdom, human organisation, human motivation, meant quite simply ‘bad’: the opposite of ‘godly’. In a strange way they were the inheritors of the attitudes expressed by Carey’s Baptist contemporaries who opposed the use of ‘means’.

Secondly, and in close relation with the first point, the Brethren wished to emphasise that they were part of a counter culture. They did not want to be seen as belonging to the mainstream and this was true of their missions as well as their home churches. It was precisely their distinctives (as in the case of all small groups) that gave them their identity. Missionaries from the CMS and the LMS and the BMS also wanted to convert the heathen, and to build schools and hospitals. But only the Brethren (until the era of faith missions which borrowed the idea from them) ‘lived by faith’.

Finally, within the Brethren movement itself, as Dr Rowdon illustrates with one telling quotation (see p. 352), the practice created an élite. The author of this review was brought up amongst the Brethren. There he encountered a theoretically egalitarian society (‘the priesthood of all believers’) rigidly structured in a hierarchical fashion. Missionaries ‘living by faith’ were at the top of this hierarchical structure, as against, for example, the clergy in some other Christian traditions or a spiritual élite based on ‘gifts’.

In summary, then, the concept and practice of ‘living by faith’ had more to do with issues of control and identity than with the discovery and implementation of a new biblical or theological insight. Dr Rowdon’s article helps us to see this clearly.

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