

The Ministry of Giving

by Steve Atkerson

Which group of believers is better able to fund church planters and assist the poor, a thousand believers organized in a single traditional church that meets in their own church sanctuary, complete with a Sunday School complex and family life center (containing a bowling alley, racket ball courts, and gymnasium), or a thousand believers divided up to 50 house churches with mostly bi-vocational leaders? A survey of U.S. Protestant congregations revealed that 82% of church revenues goes toward buildings, staff and internal programs; only 18% goes to outreach. In the biblical house church, those percentages can easily be more than reversed!

Since there is no building complex to support, often no full time pastor, and no offering plate is passed each week, one of the most frequently asked questions from folks considering the biblical house church is, "What do we do with our tithes and offerings?" The answer to this is both fun and liberating. First, God loves a "cheerful" giver (2Co 9:6-7), and giving the NT way can be great fun! Second, it is liberating in the sense that your giving resources are freed up to be given where need most: supporting full time church workers and assisting the poor.

Since the house church in which I participate rarely takes up a collection, how do we give? As a leader, I encourage each family to set aside a percentage of every paycheck into their own special "giving" fund. Week after week each family's funds can accrue there, stored up until a need in the congregation arises. Giving in our church is usually directly from giver to "getter," with no middleman involved (though collections are occasionally taken). In this way we give to missionaries, foreign orphanages, the persecuted church, local elders, and the needy. We purposely have no church bank account nor church property.

Collections

Few causes in the NT warranted an actual collection from the church corporately. One was to help other believers in need (Ac 11:27-30; 24:17; Ro 15:25-28; 1Co 16:1-4; 2Co 8:1-15; 9:12). Another was to support apostles (church planters) in their work (Ac 15:3; Ro 15:23-24; 1Co 9:1-14; 16:5-6, 10-11; 2Co 1:16; Php 4:14-18; Tit 3:13-14; 3Jn 5-8).

Whenever believers in other places were undergoing hardship (due to famine, persecution or whatever), the other churches were called upon to supply financial aid. It is important to note that such collections were never ongoing – they ceased after the need was met (Ac 11:27-30; 12:25; 1Co 16:1-4). To this end we in the Western church would do well to support our brothers in the Chinese church. (See www.persecutedchurch.com). Local giving to the poor was done in secret and directly (Mt 6:1-4, 19-21; Ep 4:28). Also, a "list" of local widows who qualified for assistance was kept by a church (1Ti 5:3, 9, 16).

The church was also obligated to support the sending out of apostles (church planters). The Greek word for "send" (*propempe*) is, in the NT, associated with helping someone on their journey with food or money, by arranging for traveling companions, means of travel, etc. (BAGD, 709). It is to "send" an apostle off with material sustenance (Ac 15:3; Ro 15:24; 1Co 16:6,11; 2Co 1:16; Tit 3:13; 3Jn 5-8). The same case can be made for the word "welcome" (Php 2:29; 3Jn 10). To "welcome" a church planter was to provide temporary lodging for him and to

meet his physical needs. NT church planters were given lump sums to get them to their destinations. Once there, they would evangelize the area, establish churches, train them in the basics and move on. En route they might be "welcomed" at existing churches and then be "sent" along again.

1Co 9:1-14 states that apostle/church planters have the "right" to earn their living from the gospel Paul was versatile enough to be able to supply his own needs when church funds were lacking. Others in the early church who received gifts were full time evangelists and qualified elders.

It is disturbing to contrast NT giving objectives with where ministry money often goes today. The Memphis newspaper *The Commercial Appeal* reported in the mid-1980s that a local Baptist church's downtown building complex had 330,000 square feet of inside space, 1,400 parking spaces, 221 classrooms, and an auditorium that held 2,700 people. Their average *monthly* utility bill, even back then, was \$25,000.00! Their pipe organ was valued at \$800,000. How did Paul and the other apostles *ever* get along without such ministerial tools? There is not much justification in the NT for such expenditures. Instead, NT pattern is to give to people, not property.

Tithing

"The Bible teaches it; I believe it; tithing." Such are the words chanted weekly by the congregation of a large church I used to attend. Some pastor-teachers have emphatically declared that unless God's people tithe, they are robbing God (Malachi 3:8-10)! One mega-church has its members cite the "Tither's Creed." They repeat, "The tithe is the Lord's. In truth we learned it. In faith we believe it. In joy we give it. The tithe!"

Of course, the Bible does teach tithing. And the same Mosaic Law that requires tithing also teaches God's people not to eat shrimp or oysters. The real question is whether such Old Covenant laws are still binding under the New Covenant. Is the law of Moses identical to the law of Christ?

By way of contrast, the OT tithe was compulsory, not voluntary. Its purpose was to financially support a theocratic government. It was like our federal income tax. It was part and parcel of the whole Levitical system with its priests and temple (2Ch 24:6, 9). Unlike Israel, the church is not under a theocracy, but rather human, secular governments. Unlike Israel, the church has no special class of priests, but rather all in the church are priests. Unlike the Mosaic Covenant, the New Covenant has no elaborate temple to build and upkeep. Instead, the church met in the homes of its members, and believers themselves (both individually and corporately), make up God's temple (living stones in a spiritual temple). Just as there is no more temple, no more separate priestly class, no more theocracy, no more "holy" land, no more restrictive diet (oysters, shrimp), so also there is no more tithing. Tithing is never commanded in the New Covenant. There has been a "change of law" (Heb 7:12), the former regulation has been "set aside" (Heb 7:18), and the New Covenant made the first one "obsolete" (Heb 8:13)!

Some brothers still feel compelled to tithe since the practice of tithing actually precedes the Old Covenant. For instance, Abraham tithed to Melchizedek, and since the Old Covenant was not initiated until several hundred years after that event, tithing is seen as an ongoing practice that

transcends any one covenant. This argument seems plausible at first. However, once it is realized that this is an isolated (not an ongoing) event in the life of Abraham (the same can be said for Jacob's tithe), and that Abraham also offered animal sacrifices and circumcised the males of his household (both of which are now considered obsolete religious practices by all Christians), the strength of that argument wanes. At best, one should conclude that we only have to tithe once in our entire lives!

Other people's consciences are bound based on Jesus' statement that "you give a tenth of your spices . . . but you have neglected the more important matters of the law . . . you should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Mt 23:23). The key to correctly applying this lies with the word "law" (Mt 23:23). Jesus was speaking to the teachers of the law and to the Pharisees – men who lived prior to the initiation of the New Covenant. The "law" is that of the Mosaic Covenant, not the New Covenant. The Israelis of Jesus' day were indeed required to tithe (and, by the way, to make animal sacrifices). We of the New Covenant are under no such requirement since that first covenant and its law has passed away. Viva the law of Christ!

Of course, there is nothing wrong with tithing if that is what God has led you to do. As was pointed out above, Abraham and Jacob both tithed voluntarily before the law was given. They serve as good examples to follow! The key is that our giving is to be according to how we have purposed in our hearts to give. Just don't feel obligated to tithe.

Reaping & Sowing

Without dispute the New Covenant extols the virtue of generosity. In Mt 6:19-21, Jesus taught us to store up treasures in heaven. In Mt 19:21, Jesus told the rich young ruler that by giving to the poor, he could have treasure in heaven. 1Ti 6:18-19 exhorts us to be "generous and willing to share . . . lay up treasure . . . as a firm foundation for the coming age." We are to share with others, "for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Heb 13:16).

But how much should we give? The answer depends on how much we want to reap later, how much we want to be blessed, and how much treasure we want in heaven. Scripture says to remember this: "whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2Co 9:6-7). According to the New Covenant, each man should give "what he has decided in his heart to give." That's all there is to it! Tithing, as required by Moses, is not a New Covenant practice. Notice that the text declares our giving is not to be done "reluctantly or under compulsion" (2Co 9:7). If some teacher says you must tithe, else you are robbing God, is that if not placing people "under compulsion"?

Give whatever you have purposed in your heart to give, and don't waste your giving resources on special church sanctuaries, janitorial fees, landscaping, fancy throne-like furniture for pastors to sit in, or eighty thousand dollar pipe organs. Instead, use it as God intended: to help the needy and to support church workers (missionaries, church planters, apostles, evangelists, qualified elders, etc).



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