

CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP



The New Testament ethic of giving is perhaps best summed up in a statement by St. Paul, who said, "Each person should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Co. 9:7). The freedom for Christians to financially support God's purposes in the world apart from pressure is not well understood by churches. Either Christians are rigidly legalistic in their approach to financial stewardship, offering 10% of their money, no more and no less, or they are passive and apathetic, giving grudgingly and spasmodically, or they respond primarily when the psychological pressure is put

upon them from some Christian fundraiser, whether a pastor or some other leader. Unfortunately, none of these approaches does justice to the Bible's teaching on financial stewardship. Many Christians regard the Old Testament tithing laws as obligatory upon the church. But when they do, such a conclusion is more likely to be in the form that is recorded in Leviticus 27:30-33, rather than that in Deuteronomy 14:22-27.

So what does the Bible actually say about financial stewardship and giving?

The earliest biblical account of giving to a religious person or cause is Abram's voluntary tithe (that is, a tenth) of the spoils of war to Melchizedek the priest of Jerusalem (Ge. 14:17-20). This gesture was not unique in the ancient Near East, and the practice of tithing to a religious institution can be found in Egyptian and Akkadian literature as well as in the Bible. Abram's grandson, Jacob, also voluntarily promised to tithe of his wealth to God (Ge. 28:22), though no details are given. However, it is in the law of Moses that tithing ceased to be voluntary.

The Mosaic law regarding tithes regulated the Israelites' giving in a three year cycle. The tithes of the first two years were to be gathered and taken to the central shrine for an annual celebration of God's bountiful blessings (Dt. 12:5-19; 14:22-27). The families of Israel were to feast before Yahweh while generously inviting aliens, orphans, widows and Levites to share their bounty. The third year's tithes were donated for the support of the clergy who had no land inheritance and who, therefore, could not cultivate crops or keep herds as a source of income (Lv. 27:26-34; Dt. 14:28-29; Nu. 18:21, 24-32). In an agrarian culture, tithing was largely in the form of animals and produce. Israel, of course, did not always follow these tithing laws, and in fact, reprimands were sometimes given when they did not (Mal. 3:8-10).

By the time of Jesus, tithing for many had become a way to earn merit with God. The legalists boasted of the fact that they gave tithes of even the most insignificant things, like spices (Mt. 23:23), while at the same time they managed to manipulate their own laws to their advantage (Mt. 23:1-4). Jesus called for a higher ethic of personal stewardship. In the first place, giving that was ostentatious or legalistic did not impress God (Lk. 18:10-14; Mt. 6:1-4). Gifts were to be evaluated, not so much by how large they were, but by how much the person had left over after the gift had been offered (Lk. 21:1-4). Jesus taught that giving to God must be done without the selfish motive of seeking a return (Mt. 5:42; 10:8; Lk. 14:12-14), and in some cases, Jesus called upon people to surrender the totality of their wealth (Lk. 12:33-34; Mt. 19:16-24).

Once one passes into the era of the early church, Old Testament obligatory tithing can no longer be found. One reason is that early Christian culture was more urban than agrarian, and a tithing system based upon farming was impractical in the great metropolitan cities of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the early Christian leaders strongly maintained that Christians were free from the Mosaic legalism which had dominated the previous age (Ro. 10:4; Ga. 5:1). In the council of Acts 15, when the Christian leaders gathered to discuss just what was to be required of Gentile Christians as far as the law of Moses was

concerned, tithing laws were pointedly ignored, though there was certainly a concern for the poor (Ga. 2:9-10). Yet even though the early Christians did not employ the Old Testament laws of obligatory tithing, they were conscientious about financial stewardship.

In the Jerusalem church, believers pooled their resources in order to share with each other (Ac. 4:32-37), though such action was voluntary and not forced (Ac. 5:1-4). Special concern was given to the disadvantaged, such as widows (Ac. 6:1; 11:27-30; Ja. 2:14-17), though criteria were developed to avoid dispensing support unwisely (1 Ti. 5:3, 9-10). Paul solicited funds from the churches in Macedonia, Achaia and Galatia for the impoverished Christians in Palestine (1 Co. 16:1-4; 2 Co. 8:1-4; Ro. 15:25-27).

In the collection of these relief offerings, some very wise principles were employed to administer the gifts of the generous Christians in Asia Minor and Greece. In the first place, Paul allowed members of the assembly to oversee the collection and distribution of the money (1 Co. 16:2-4; 2 Co. 8:16-19). This principle, in a modern sense, calls for an open review of Christian finances with all who contribute. Second, offerings were voluntary, not obligatory, though generosity was certainly encouraged (2 Co. 8:1-8; 9:5-7). Paul called this kind of generosity the "grace of giving." Third, the motivation for such giving was due to the selfless gift of Christ (2 Co. 8:9) and the desire for equality among God's people (2 Co. 8:13-15). Any gifts which were made were to be evaluated according to the giver's ability to give (2 Co. 8:12). Finally, the administration of the gift was conducted in a highly ethical and sensitive manner, for as Paul says, "We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (2 Co. 8:20-21).

In summary, then, modern Christians should take their ethic of giving from the early Christians and the teachings of Jesus. Being stingy is surely antithetic to the liberality and generosity taught by the Lord Jesus. At the same time, psychological manipulation and guilt-building are inappropriate methods of raising funds, even for the best of causes. The advice offered in Proverbs is still very much in order: "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine" (3:9-10). As far as material wealth is concerned, it is well to remember, "Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife" (17:1). And finally, "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done" (19: 17).



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